

Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with **Magical Tools**

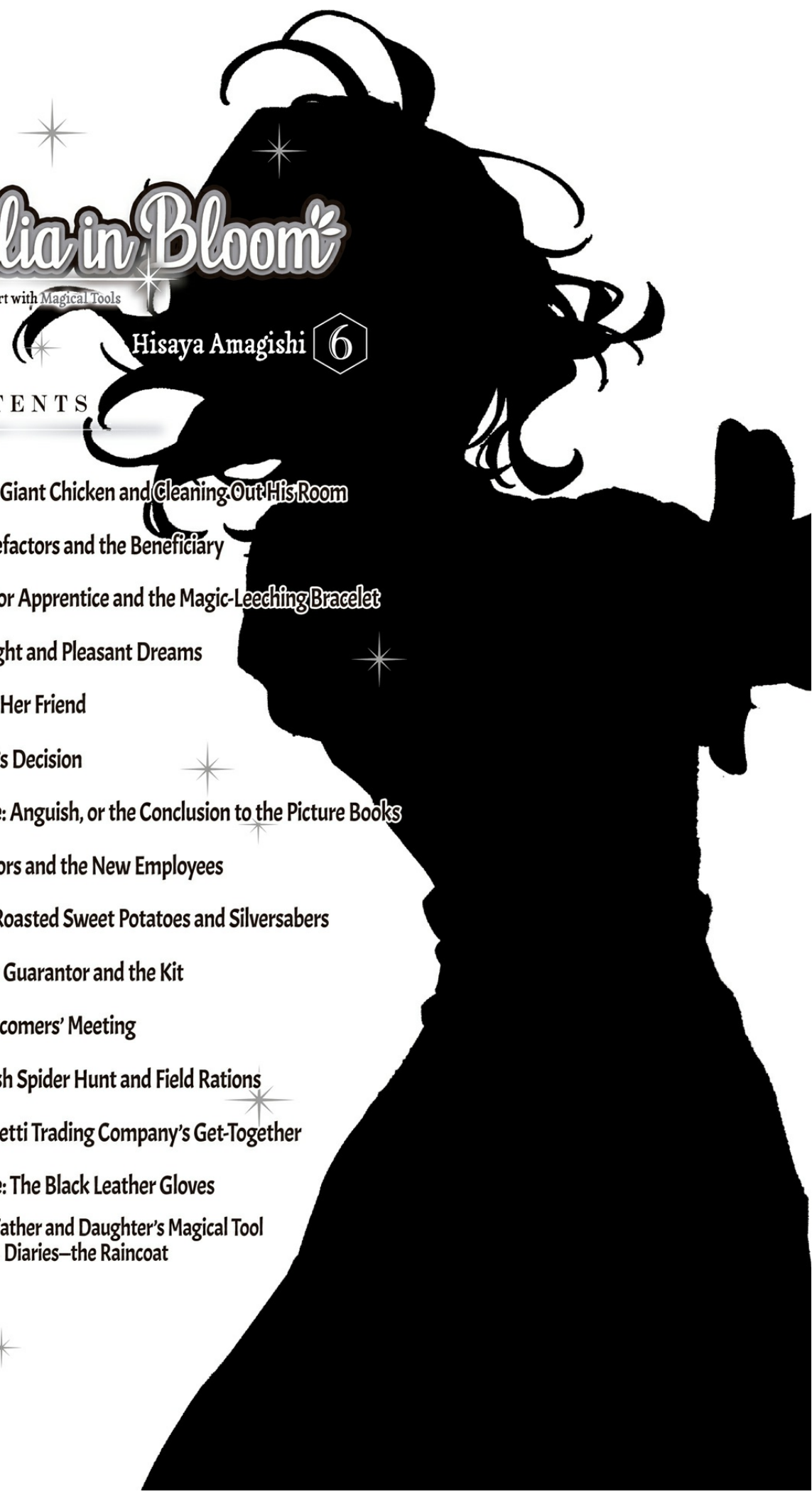
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Panfried Giant Chicken and Cleaning Out His Room

“Oh, it even *sounds* delicious...” Across the table, the black-haired young man stared with his bewitching golden eyes at the thick slab of meat sizzling on the hot iron skillet.

It was by recommendation that they were visiting this certain restaurant located in the Central District of the capital of the Kingdom of Ordine. Apparently, their lunch specials were to die for, and so they had both ordered the same thing.

“So this is giant chicken? It’s my first time trying it...” she said, looking at her extremely exclusive Panfried Giant Chicken Special. The special consisted of two cuts of giant chicken imported from abroad: the first cut was in the shape of a curled ellipse and the other was a thick, flat steak that looked incredibly toothsome. The chickens in her previous life had been bred for their meat, and giant chickens in this life were no different. Selective breeding was especially common in the neighboring nation.

Dahlia was able to make the comparison because she had been reincarnated into this world. In her previous life, she had worked for a company that dealt in household appliances, and, perhaps influenced by that, Dahlia had found her calling in crafting magical tools that made everyday life easier. The silver vase on the table reflected her vivid red hair and green eyes and her otherwise modest countenance.

In sharp contrast was the youth sitting across from her, Volfred Scalfarotto, looked to be captivated by the meal before his eyes. His glossy black hair evoked the night sky, his visage was so beautiful that onlookers questioned their eyes, his perfectly chiseled jawline and—most entrancing of all—his dazzling eyes of liquid gold won over every lady he came across, though that only burdened the man with trauma. Volf was a knight of the kingdom, a member of the Order of Beast Hunters, and the fourth son of an earldom. After meeting twice through sheer coincidence, he and the commoner Dahlia had

become the fastest of friends.

“Gotta start with the oyster first, since that’s the most special, right?” Volf asked.

“I think you’re right.”

The two of them turned to the elliptical cuts of meat, which were limited to only ten orders per day. Located on the back on either side of the spine and beside the thighs, the oysters—or sot-l’y-laisse, as some called them—were the size of table tennis balls on a regular chicken, making the coveted part very scarce. However, what was in front of them were more like softballs; it was just a little scary to think that giant chickens were also about three times the size of regular chickens. Steam wafted out as she cut it with her fork and knife, and when she took a bite, the flavor and the heat of the poultry filled her mouth. The cut’s unique tender-but-springy texture was delightful; it was almost a shame to swallow it. The simple seasoning of salt and pepper did wonders to enhance rather than mask the savoriness of the meat.

As she was relishing her bite, Volf said, “I guess I don’t need to ask if you enjoy it.”

She could always tell how much he enjoyed his food by how many times he chewed, but it was a little embarrassing now that it was the other way around. “Um, how about you, Volf?”

“It’s good. I’ve had it before at home when I was little; it’s one of my brother’s favorites, and he’d always share it with me.” He still did, but Guido must’ve really doted on his baby brother when they were growing up. “Huh. You know, I forgot about that until now.”

“That must be a fond memory for you.”

“Yeah. I’m glad it popped up in my head too. Did you have chicken with your father as well?”

“We used to buy a whole roast chicken for the winter festival. That way my father and I would get an oyster each.” This end-of-the-year ritual likely had its origins in her memories of Christmas from her past life. Be that as it may, her father really looked forward to it too—mainly because it went so well with a

glass or five of wine. “But giant chickens are much larger, aren’t they?”

“So big, in fact, that it’s quite the problem if they make a break for it.”

Regular chickens were enough of a headache if they escaped—to say nothing of the noise—and so nearly all chicken farms had been moved outside of the royal capital and into the surrounding villages. What was worse was that they could fly quite well compared to the chickens Dahlia once knew. While that risk could be easily defeated by clipping their wings, it was said that the practice made their meat taste worse—it stressed the animals out, as the people in her previous world would have put it. Instead, the chickens of Ordine were pastured with lots of feed to prevent them from escaping.

After they were finished with their oysters, the two of them moved on to the thighs, panfried to a delicious golden brown. “It says the sauce is made with a blend of spices, apples, and ruby ale. That’s a little different,” Dahlia said, reading from the menu next to her plate. Accompanying each of their mains were an unchilled ruby ale, salad, roasted tomato soup with cheese, and a mini fruit tart for dessert. Everything was served at the same time, so there was no need to worry about the server interrupting their meal.

When Volf poured the sauce on his chicken, it immediately began spattering. “Looks like the skillet’s still plenty hot, so let me pour it on for you.”

Dahlia was very grateful for the offer; she had on a white blouse today. “That would be great, thank you.” Having applied the sauce, they tucked into their second pieces of chicken. Judging by its size, the dark meat looked to be boneless. All sides were well seared, making it nearly difficult to get a knife in it without being very careful. Once she did, though, plenty of juice ran from the meat. Dahlia took a small bite and the apple in the sauce took center stage. With a good balance of fat to the meat, it was flavorful and tender without being heavy or cloying—in other words, it was very delicious.

With how much Volf was savoring his bite, he must have loved it as well. “Oh, this is so good. I wonder if we can smoke it and turn it into bacon as well...” The Order of Beast Hunters had quite the limited menu, subsisting mainly on stale rye, jerky, cheese, dried fruits, nuts, and the like. However, with the recent introduction of the camp stove—one of Dahlia’s magical inventions—the

knight's were finally able to have warm meals in the field. Giant hog bacon had become one of their favorites, so Volf must have wanted to have giant chicken the same way.

“Then you’d be able to have giant chicken bacon on your expeditions.”

“Yeah, and we could have it in our rooms in the barracks, although that might draw quite the crowd.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Whenever we fry up bacon at night in our own rooms, we’re bound to find uninvited faces and accompanying drinks.”

“With how good it smells, I could hardly blame them.”

“Fair. It used to be only Dorino and Randolph who’d swing by to my room, but I’ve been getting more company as of late. I don’t want my room to stink of men, so we’ve started to drink out in the mess hall. But once some jerky or dried meat gets going on the compact magical stove, we’ll have a whole party before we know it.” He may have been grumbling, but in spite of his words, he sure didn’t look to be bothered by it. Dahlia couldn’t be happier that he’d found a way to connect with his squadmates.

“Try not to drink too much, Volf?”

“Of course. The other time, one of the older guys got a bit too rowdy, so everybody’s been drinking in moderation now.”

“Was the older knight a bad drunk?”

“No, he just fell into a deep sleep in the mess hall and thus couldn’t go home for his day off.”

“Oh, what a waste, then. His family must have been very worried for him.”

“Yeah. The morning after, his wife—who’s an ice mage in the Mages’ Corps, by the way—came by to the barracks to ask what happened to him. There was no chilling fan in the room, but a shiver went down my spine.” Hopefully, the only thing that had happened to him was falling asleep.

Dahlia hurried on to another topic. “I assume the Beast Hunters also frequent nearby establishments as well?”

“Yeah, and also each others’ homes—though I abstain from that.”

“You’re worried, I suppose?”

“Well, I make it a point not to visit anyone whose daughter is unwed. Kirk invites me over from time to time, but his fiancée shows up from time to time as well, so, um... I don’t know. Maybe I’m just overly self conscious.” The burden of being *too* attractive. But that wasn’t him being overly self conscious—it was only natural for someone who’d had such ill fortune with women.

“You’re being prudent is all. But it’s not like you hit on girls or anything, Volf, so it’s shocking to hear that people would make those accusations about you...”

“There’s no smoke without fire, but for a noble like me, there’s still some sort of haze, I guess. I haven’t been chaperoning Lady Altea as often lately, so they’re saying all sorts of stuff about how I’ve just been fooling around with her and her money.”

“Oh, Volf, there aren’t even any embers there...” Dahlia couldn’t imagine how rough it must be for him. There must be lots of dry ice around him, considering all the fireless smoke.

“It is what it is,” Volf said dejectedly. “Everything’s all right as long as I can share a good meal with you, Dahlia.”

There he goes, all of a sudden saying something I might just take the wrong way, Dahlia thought to herself as her heart skipped a beat. “I’m, um, very happy to be able to share a meal like this with you as well. It seems everyone’s been so busy lately, though...”

“Marcella’s said the same. He must be swamped with work at the Couriers’ Guild.”

“Irma too. She sent a letter saying she’s been too busy to meet up. And if she’s that busy, Marcella must be taking care of the chores at home as well.”

“That makes sense. I guess salons have their peak seasons too.”

“Indeed. If things are really that hectic, I’m sure they’ll have to hire someone at the salon or someone to take care of the chores, even if it’s just twice a week or something.”

“You’ve been really busy too. Have you thought about hiring a cleaner?”

“No, I can handle things, since I live alone. I only use so many rooms, and I even send out my laundry to get cleaned. Other than that, I get people to clean the exterior walls and the roof once a year.” The sturdy tower may have been built out of stone, but it was still important that it got checked for cracks, so Dahlia hired people with magic and water jets to clean the walls of any moss.

“If there’s any manual labor or cleaning I can do to help, let me know. I’ve been mooching from the Green Tower Diner, after all.”

“What are you talking about?” Her home was not a restaurant, nor was Volf freeloading. He always brought over nice liquor and cooking ingredients, not to mention all the crafting materials. And after every meal, he took care of the cleanup before heading home; he’d even brought over special detergents the other day and made her kitchen gleam. If anything, she should hire him, but she chased that ridiculous thought out of her head.

The black-haired youth beamed broadly. “Just say the word and I’ll gladly work for you.”



After their meal, the two dropped by the bookstore before going back to the tower. Much to Dahlia’s happiness, they had recently brought in a book on magical tools from Ordine’s neighbor. Each nation varied wildly from the others in its magical tool development, and Volf had been shocked to hear Dahlia explain that this book was about tools specifically for capturing and raising monsters. Her eyes had practically sparkled as she said how much she wished to see the tools in action someday. With the way she bored into the descriptions in the book, Volf was almost sure that she would like to take a shot at making them as well. Perhaps instead of culling monsters, the Order of Beast Hunters would one day capture them with the magical tools she made—so thought Volf as he listened to her explain.

Now, on the second floor of the tower, she fit today’s purchase onto the bookcase filled primarily with books on cooking and magical tools. On the lower shelf was the bestiary he’d bought a few days ago, and beside that were two pairs of white gloves. One pair was smaller and the other bigger—for her and

for him—which brought a warm smile to Volf’s face.

“I’m not sure if your bookcase can hold many more,” he said. With the new addition, there really wasn’t much space left.

“There’s a large bookcase up on the fourth floor too, but before I start using it, I suppose I’ll have to clean that room one of these days...” Her words were marked by hesitancy, and it showed on her face as well. He had heard that Dahlia’s room was on the third floor, and he deduced that it was her father’s room on the fourth floor. It must have been hard to clean and throw out so many memories in physical form left in that room.

“There’s no need to rush. You can clean your father’s room when you’re ready.”

“I’m fine. It’s been more than a year since he passed, so I know it’s about time I did it. It’s just...”—she paused, searching for her words—“difficult entering his study.”

“I understand...”

“No, I don’t mean it like that. There’s a lot of, erm...”—she paused again—“sentiment in there.”

“What do you mean?”

Dahlia froze. She turned and looked away from him and began speaking to the wall. “When I was in college, I figured I ought to clean his room, since he never did. And so one day while he was out, I opened the door and, ugh, the floor was covered in picture books...”

“Scintillating ones...?”

“Yes, *those* ones. I threw every single one in a garbage bag and torched them with the enhanced dryer.”

“I see...” Volf said, trying to play it off as cool as possible. Her mention of that so-called enhanced dryer caught his curiosity, but it wasn’t the time to ask about it.

“When he came home, he said, ‘Those books contain a man’s sentiment, so leave the cleaning to me and don’t go in there.’ For the three days that he

ignored my entire existence, his eyes were completely vacant. Those must've meant a lot to him."

"Ah..." Undoubtedly, it wasn't so much the books; rather, he must've reacted like so because it had been his daughter who found them. But who was Volf to tell her?

"Since then, I'd never gone back inside that room and left it as is, even after his passing. I'll light an insect coil by the door from time to time, but, well, I dare not venture in for fear of whatever creepy crawlies or sentimental picture books lying in wait."

It was painfully obvious that she didn't want to deal with it, and Volf couldn't bear not helping a friend in need. "You want me to take care of it? I'm not bothered by that kind of stuff."

A friend in need is a friend indeed, they say, but here his friend had laid a trap out for him. "If you find anything you like, you can take it home with you, Volf," said Dahlia.

The last time he'd broken into a cold sweat like this was when Captain Grato demonstrated his intimidation during boot camp. "Oh, no, I swear the thought hadn't even crossed my mind!"

"I promise I won't be upset." Her voice was calm, but again, as they say, that only preceded storms. "What would I have to be upset about anyway? I mean, I don't get it, but that stuff seems to contain a lot of sentiments. Plus, you said you were a behinds-man and my father had a thing for legs, so maybe you'll find that you have the same tastes."

"Hold on! Don't lump us together..."

"Oh, sorry. It's a whole world of difference for stuff like that, isn't it? Legs and behinds must be two completely separate things, right?"

Her straight face begged for a straight answer, but Volf wasn't sure how to respond, if he should at all. All he could do was try to look as indifferent as possible. "Ah, um, well, summer's over and it's been a year already, so there might be a lot of bugs inside."

"That's a good point. I can't stand the things..." With goosebumps all over

her, she waved the white flag, and Volf accepted the task of cleaning the study.

Though Volf had been up to the roof plenty of times, he had never set foot on the fourth floor. It was split into two rooms—Carlo’s bedroom and his study. But Dahlia’s father—who was apparently infamous for his messiness—had slept and studied in his bedroom and turned his study into more or less a storage closet. It was that storage room that was the problem at hand.

“That’s somethin’, all right...” Volf could but awkwardly smile when he swung the door open. The floor was covered in books, notes, and pretty portraits of debaucherous dames—that is to say that there wasn’t much flooring visible at all. Perhaps Dahlia had been right to be so angry.

“I know this can’t be easy, Volf, so you don’t have to...”

“Nah. All I have to do is put everything into the bag, right?” He took the burlap sack from his distressed friend and stepped inside. The stacks of skintone softbacks easily reached chest height, and almost all of them featured leggy ladies. Honestly, it was a damn impressive collection. It would be a feast for the eyes if not for the glare, devoid of any warmth, that would come from Dahlia; Volf respectfully refrained from indulging in the art. Instead, he opened up the bag and began grabbing a handful of the books, but then what seemed to be magical toolmaking memos fell out. He took them to the hallway to see what to do with them. “Dahlia, there are quite a few loose sheets between the pages. What should I do with them?”

“Those look like the plans for the large hot water dispensers...” she replied. “Sorry for the extra trouble, but could you please set these aside? It might be helpful to keep them around.”

“Sure thing.” It turned out that it wasn’t as easy as stuffing everything into the bag; Volf had to flip through the pages of the picture books for hidden notes and memos, then pile them up for Dahlia to sort through afterwards.

Atop the next mound, a thick notebook lay open, displaying its contents: a date and the words “Dahlia, waterproof cloth.” A report? A journal entry? Whatever the case may have been, it wasn’t something for Volf to read or throw away, and so he closed it and put it aside with the notes. Then it was back to mechanically flipping through the pages of the picture books and

tossing them into the bag. Though some of them may have caught his eye, none of them could convince him they were worth keeping for himself. Volf tied the sack tightly with string once the task was complete. This experience had taught him that he and Carlo may have had similar tastes—something he could never tell Dahlia.

“Guess that’s everything...” It was only when the floor was finally visible that Volf noticed there was a large, flat, brown leather briefcase hidden behind a mountain of papers under the desk. It looked tough and sturdy, so perhaps there were important magical toolmaking files tucked away inside. That, or *really* important picture books—Volf couldn’t rule that out, and so he had to open it to check. Inside was a thick book bound in chestnut leather, and on its cover was an orange garnet and some sort of magic circle—telltale signs of a spellbook. Forcing it open might turn it to ashes or even freeze his hand solid, so he placed it back into the briefcase.

He was about to bring it out to the hallway, but when he saw that it also contained a dust-covered sketchbook and a white handkerchief, he paused for a moment. On the cover of the sketchbook was a block printed sword. The edges were slightly yellowed, but as none of the high-quality pages were filled in, it could likely still be used. The needlework on the old handkerchief was crude—it took some squinting to see a flower stitched in red. The gift of an embroidered white handkerchief was traditionally a noblewoman’s way of declaring “You are my first love.” But whoever the lady was, she must’ve churned these out and handed them out to every man she saw, given how crude the handiwork was. Still, given that it was enshrined in this room, it was probably something from when Carlo was young. Perhaps it was a present from Dahlia’s mother.

Though Volf wasn’t sure what he should do, he brought it all outside for Dahlia to examine. “All the picture books are in the burlap sack. I’ll bring it downstairs later. Here are the notes; some of them only have numbers, so you should take a look at them.”

“Sorry for imposing this on you, Volf, and thank you so much.” Dahlia looked a little troubled.

“Not a problem. This was on the floor too. Some sort of spellbook?”

“It looks like it. It might be something my father was writing,” she said, as she tried to flip open the cover. “Oh. I can’t open this.”

“Is it bound to your father?”

“I think it might be for Mr. Orlando instead, judging by the color of the gemstone. I suppose it makes sense, seeing how he’s the senior apprentice...”

“Dahlia, with how suddenly your father passed, I imagine he just didn’t have time to prepare one for you as well.”

“Yeah, unfortunately. At least I have my own spellbook at Professor Oswald’s workshop. Though I am a little curious as to what’s in here.”

“Is there no way for you to crack it open?”

Dahlia shook her head as she looked at the orange garnet with crestfallen eyes. “An elite mage might be able to strip the enchantment off the cover, but more likely than not, doing so would set the book ablaze. That’s what the professor said. In any case, it’s bound to Mr. Orlando, so I ought to hand it to him...”

“You know, I don’t think you need to. With what he did to you, he has no right to take it.”

“It’s all water under the bridge now, and he *is* my father’s apprentice regardless.” She fell silent as she took the briefcase from Volf, brushing him with her frigid finger. “I’ll think about how to get it to him. Maybe I’ll have someone deliver it to him, or maybe I’ll get a witness and hand it over to him at the guild.”

It was hard seeing how she hurt, so Volf scrambled to find a new topic. “Here’s an unused sketchbook with quite the intricate cover.”

“Oh, that’s the Magical Water Blade from the fairy tale.”

“The one where the knight slays the fire dragon?” Now that she mentioned it, Volf could see it. *The Magical Water Blade* was a story that Volf’s mother used to read to him. When a fire dragon appeared and terrorized the kingdom, a knight set out on an adventure to find the eponymous magical sword. He brought home the magical sword, slew the dragon, and married the princess,

then lived happily ever after—so the clichéd children’s story went. Volf remembered how he had begged his mother over and over again to read the story to him.

She continued, “When I was in college, woodblock-printed covers like these were all the rage. There were cool ones with swords, dragons, and lions, and cute ones with flowers, kittens, and whatnot. We did a lot of concept and technical drawing in magical toolmaking classes, so this might be one of the sketchbooks I got in bulk.”

“Is that right? We almost never drew in chivalric studies except for stuff like topography, though I do some sketching from time to time on expeditions.” There was a water-type magical sword in the castle as well. The longsword was rather heavy, and its sheath was blue like the ocean. However, the blade had probably never seen the light of day, as no one could draw it. Any knight could put in a request to try, and Volf had done so twice without any success. If magical swords didn’t require their wielder to control powerful magic, then it probably took someone with a pure soul. That said, it wasn’t as though he had any regrets—he loved the swords that Dahlia made him infinitely more.

“It’s a bit old, but would you like to keep it as a notepad, then?” She must’ve thought the sword on the front cover would entice him, and Volf took her up on her offer.

“There’s this as well. I’m thinking it might be something important...” Volf handed her the white embroidered handkerchief. He didn’t know if she wanted it, seeing how it was caked in a layer of dust.

“Oh, no, we can toss this too. I was the one who did the embroidering.”

“You did, Dahlia?”

“When I was six or seven, my father said he had never received one, so I asked him if he would like one. He was probably just being nice and said he would, even if it was from me. So, well, that’s the story behind it...” She looked at the needlework with a frown.

Volf found it an endearing story. “Have you given any other embroidered handkerchiefs, Dahlia?”

“Only this one to my father. I’ve never been asked for one either...” she said. “Now that I look at it again, that’s some terrible craftsmanship. I won’t need it, so would you toss that in with the garbage?”

He paused. “Could I take it to wipe my hands, then?”

“Sure, be my guest. I suppose the room was really dusty, so let me go get you a wet towel as well.” Then she trotted down the steps.

As Volf saw her off, he thought to himself: he’d never really had a female friend before, let alone a girlfriend. And after his mother died, there hadn’t been any other women in his family, so he had never received anything embroidered from anyone. Sure, there were the occasional strangers who would foist handkerchiefs upon him, but he had never accepted any of them. People thought of him as super popular with the ladies, but he had never received anything with accessories embroidered in blue either—a token of platonic love. He didn’t even have anything stitched on the back of his shirt for luck on expeditions. As he examined the handkerchief, those thoughts made him just a little envious. It was way out of order, but he tucked it into his jacket pocket instead of using it as a rag.

Carlo’s room was indeed filled with sentiment.

The Benefactors and the Beneficiary

“Wow. There’s so much I didn’t know, even with my experience in the field...”

After dinner at the tower, Volf and Dahlia sat side by side reading the bestiary they had bought a few days ago. The tome contained eye-catching artwork of the monsters in the neighboring nation, such as the sköll and unicorn, the mighty forest serpent, and the terrible hydra. There was detailed information on how to raise bombastworms and pasture crimson cattle and baphomets, demonstrating the common attitude in that country that monsters were livestock.

Volf continued, “It says there that cockatrices charge up before unleashing their petrification breath. That sounds like something we could exploit instead of hacking away at its head as we usually do.”

Even Dahlia was surprised by how much was new to her. “I knew that cockatrice beak prevents petrification, but I never knew that its feathers could be used as material for one-time protection from petrification.”

“I can’t help but kick myself for wasting its feathers and all the other parts.”

There was so much they thought they ought to have known that was seemingly common knowledge in Ordine’s neighbor. Different people in different places know different things, after all.

Volf peeked out the window and said, “It’s dark out already.” The two of them had been so enraptured by the book that time had just flown right by.

Perking up her ears, Dahlia heard faint drops of rain. A streak ran down the windowpane. “Oh, it looks like it’s raining. Would you like to stay a little longer?”

“It’s gotten so late already...” Just then, as if to shut him up, the passing shower fell even harder. The two of them looked out and saw the pouring rain before turning to each other and chuckling.

“Volf, could you stay longer?”

“I’ll do that, thank you,” he replied. Suddenly, his brows furrowed. “Sounds like someone’s coming.”

“Huh? At this time?” The sound of the rain nearly masked the bell at the gate. Dahlia looked out the window and saw a figure in a cloak. It must’ve been something urgent, and she rushed down the steps.

“Sorry for coming at this hour...”

“Marcella!” There he was, standing soaked at the front gate. Dahlia hurried him inside.

Marcella took a step past the threshold and sank into a deep bow as water dripped off his sandy hair. “Dahlia, I need your help! Please save Irma!”



“What happened to Irma?! Is she okay?!”

“She’s pregnant, Dahlia. But she ain’t doin’ so hot. She’s in danger.” When Marcella finally raised his head, he showed everyone how terribly red his eyes were.

Dahlia handed him a towel. “What is her condition?”

Still dripping wet, he refused the offer to go upstairs and instead sat on the stone steps. It was only after firmly pressing the towel against his eyes that he spoke again. “Remember how Irma couldn’t get down the steps when the four of us got together for dinner last time?”

“Right, the summer festival...” She distinctly remembered how Marcella had had to carry Irma home in his arms. That was nearly three weeks ago, and Dahlia hadn’t seen Irma since; the only exchange they had had was through letters, and Irma had said she had her hands full. Dahlia had assumed she meant that business was good, but it seemed like that assumption was incorrect.

“Yeah. Afterwards, it was obvious that something was up. She felt nauseous, but brushed it off as having eaten too much or caught a cold or somethin’. But it didn’t get better, and so I dragged her to the docs, who said she was with child. At first, we couldn’t have been happier, but then it got harder and harder for her to move...”

“Is Irma still with the doctors right now?”

“No. They couldn’t do nothin’ about it, so she’s at the temple.”

“The temple? Can the priests use healing magic to cure her morning sickness?”

“It’s no morning sickness. It’s hypermageia. The baby’s magic is too powerful, and they said Irma’s body can’t handle it.”

“What?!” She was taken aback. Hypermageia could lead to difficulty in breathing or even cardiac arrest. Dahlia had heard that if the magic got out of control, it could cause burns or frostbite as well. It was supposed to be something that happened to nobility, and only very rarely at that. Why, then,

would it affect Irma? “How did that happen? Irma only has grade two magic. How much do you have, Marcella?”

“Fourteen...”

“Hm?” For a moment, she thought she’d heard wrong. Fourteen was way more than what Dahlia had as the daughter of a noblewoman and a magical toolmaker. Fourteen was at the level of high-ranking nobility—something that almost never occurred in common folk. Someone with that much magic could get a full ride through mage school.

“Is that maybe, uh, a case of late-blooming magic?” Volf asked hesitantly.

Marcella cast his gaze to the ground. “Yeah. I started with grade four magic, but after nearly frickin’ dyin’ in a carriage crash when I was seventeen, my magic shot way up. That’s when I learned that my old lady and old man were actually my aunt and uncle. My birth mother worked in the red-light district and my birth father was probably some noble, but who knows.”

“Marcella...”

“Volf, Dahlia, you two ever thought it was weird how a guy like me is named Marcella?” There seemed to be a shadow over his smile. In Ordine, “Marcello” was typically the masculine and “Marcella” the feminine form of the name, but the pattern was only that—typical—and so Dahlia had never thought twice about it. He continued, “Well, it’s because I got the name from my mother. She chose it in case my father were ever to come looking for either of us. Not that it means much.”

“Marcella, is your mother...” But she didn’t need to finish her sentence.

“She didn’t survive the childbirth ’cause I was quite premature, they said. Maybe it was a case of hypermageia too...” Marcella’s pained words dripped onto the floor along with the rainwater. “Before we got married, the doctors told us that we wouldn’t be able to have a kid together because we’re more than ten grades apart, but now...”

“I see...” Irma had said that having a kid wasn’t in her plans, citing the fact that work was so busy and she had to pay back the loan she’d taken to build the salon. Despite knowing how much she loved children, Dahlia had understood

that Irma wanted to put work first.

“The priests are healing her with magic, but she’s not keeping any food down. She also hasn’t been able to move her fingers for three days—they became rock hard. Why did my kid have to have my useless earth magic?” In place of his usual unfailing smile, he wore teary eyes. Marcella stood up, bit his lip, and bowed. “Please, Dahlia, convince Irma to give up on the child instead of her own life! No matter what I say or how I beg, she won’t listen to me, but maybe she’ll listen to you. I know I’m scum for asking this of you, but please, for Irma’s sake...”

“Marcella...” Instead of acknowledging him, Dahlia turned to Volf.

He nodded. “I’ll go fetch us a carriage to the temple. Dahlia, you go get ready to leave.”

“Thank you, Volf. Marcella, let’s go to the temple together and I’ll talk to Irma.”

“Thank you, you two, thank you...” The rain struck even harder, drowning out all their voices. Marcella bowed again, looking smaller than ever.



The carriage headed northeast towards the castle where the temple was located. In this world, a temple was a large complex, something between a church and a forum of Dahlia’s previous world. Its walls were made of some kind of white crystal that glimmered in the noon sun; a dark, rainy night like tonight did little for it. Dahlia had thought that their destination would’ve been the Hall of Healing, but Marcella directed the driver to stop at the small entrance beside. That was where they provided palliative and end-of-life care, and it was where the mortuary was as well.

Dahlia tensed up as she crossed the threshold into the building—she hadn’t been here since Carlo’s funeral. Volf, beside her, had an obvious frown as well. They continued down a corridor with gray walls and a darker gray floor, then the three of them greeted a priest sitting down in a chair. The man had a sympathetic look on his face and seemed to recognize Marcella. Then, at the back of the building, a white door came into view.

“Irma’s in this room,” Marcella said. “Sorry, Dahlia, but—”

“It’s okay, Marcella, I understand. Let me talk to her for a bit,” she said, preventing him from finishing his sentence. He nodded.

“I’ll be in the waiting room with Marcella. Hang a right at the end of the hall and you’ll find us.”

“Okay, and, um...thanks,” she replied.

“Of course.” It was hard for her to ask him to take care of Marcella, but Volf seemed to have read her mind.

Dahlia took a deep breath and slowly cracked the door open. “Irma?” She got an answer immediately.

“I’m giving birth.” Irma, wrapped around in a blanket, was already getting up from her bed in the middle of the room. By her feet was a large tub. She had shrunk, her face was as pale as paraffin, and all redness was gone from her lips. Her usual shiny tea-colored hair was dull and pale, as if she had aged fifty years.

“Hey! I haven’t even said anything yet.”

“I bet Marcella told you to come persuade me. But I’m not going to listen, you know? I’m giving birth to this child no matter what.”

“I knew you’d say that...” Dahlia knew her friend well and had known her answer even before coming here. What she hadn’t expected was how hoarse Irma’s voice was. “Do you know how much magic you have?”

“I had two originally, I’m up to eight now with this child in me. Pretty amazing, huh?” She placed her hands on her belly and laughed, only to immediately bend over and throw up into the tub; out came little else but blood-tinged water. The fingers grasping the tub looked like they had light brown crystals stuck to them. Her child’s power was probably activating the earth magic.

Dahlia rushed to the bedside table to pour a cup of water, then brought it to Irma, who gargled with it between gasps of air.

“Thanks. Don’t worry, Dahlia. I just have to put up with this for a few more

months.” Irma’s wan smile didn’t make a convincing case that she could last that long. “You’ve been busy, haven’t you? Are you handling work okay?”

“I’m not *that* busy, especially not since I have Ivano handling the business side of things. No overtime at our company either.” Dahlia didn’t want Irma to worry about her, not right now.

Irma stared back with sunken eyes. “Hey, Dahlia? Are you and Volf really not dating?”

“We’re really not. Just friends. Why do you ask?” Dahlia wondered if Irma was just trying to change the subject, to distract Dahlia from trying to persuade her. She walked closer to Irma so she didn’t have to strain her voice.

“Can I ask you for a favor?”

“Ask away.”

“It’s something only you can do for me...” Irma’s eyes fluttered as she grasped Dahlia with her cold, hard, bony fingers. “Dahlia, if anything happens to me, I want you and Marcella to—”

“Don’t even joke about it, Irma!” The words escaped her lips as a scream. “You’re going to get better, and you, Marcella, and your baby are going to be happily together forever! And that’s how it’s going to be!”

“It would be nice to believe that.”

Hearing her friend so defeated, so resigned to her fate, made Dahlia want to scream again. *Come on, Irma. Why do I have to raise your kid with Marcella? Marcella belongs beside Irma, and Irma belongs beside Marcella.* But she held her tongue and bit through her fingernail. Dahlia dug through her memories, hoping to remember whether she had an old classmate who’d dealt with a similar situation. The nobility must’ve had some magic or magical tool to help, maybe even potions or drugs of some kind. She had the connections and money to make it work, just as long as someone had the means to save both mother and child. “Irma, don’t you give up yet. This sort of stuff happens to nobles all the time, I’m sure, so I’ll ask around. I frequent the castle, and I’m sure I know someone who might know something.”

“But I wouldn’t want to cause you any trouble...”

"I have Volf too. We'll be fine."

"Then I'll be troubling him too..."

"He's a friend to you and Marcella, isn't he? That's what friends are for. Besides, if you're dead set on becoming a mother, then you'll have to rely on us a bit more!" Dahlia half-pleaded, half-demanded of her friend.

"Look at you, Dahlia. You're about to burst into tears."

"I am about to." That much was true, even if Irma was saying it to tease her a little. "And I'll bawl if you're going to leave me too, Irma."

"Dahlia..."

She had first lost her mother. Their maid had returned home when Dahlia went off to college. The friends she had worked so hard to make had all left school for family reasons. Her dear father had suddenly died when he went out one day. The fiancé with whom she was supposed to navigate life side by side had left her before they got married. That left Irma, someone who had been together with her since they were little and an older sister to her. Even if it were all for selfish reasons, Dahlia was not about to lose anyone else.

"Fine," Irma continued, "I'll take advantage of your kindness. Lend me your aid, Dahlia, and ask Volf for me too."

"You'd best bet, Irma!"

"But don't do anything too rash, okay?"

"What are you talking about? You're supposed to encourage me here."

"You're right. Dahlia, I hope everything goes well."

"Same to you."

Irma lifted her trembling hands and took Dahlia's. Dahlia, ignoring the rocky fingertips, gritted her teeth and smiled.



"Marcella, I'm just gonna pop out for a bit."

"Sure. And, uh, sorry for draggin' the two of you here today..."

"Hey, that's what friends are for." The waiting room became even emptier

when Volf headed back up the hallway. Unfortunately, he knew the layout of the temple well—he'd been here on numerous occasions to visit his squadmates—and quickly arrived at the potion dispensary.

"Hi, good to see you again. My name is Volfred Scalfarotto. I'm from the Order of Beast Hunters," he said, removing his glasses.

The lady at the counter shot to her feet as she looked straight into his eyes. "Oh, yes! Hello!"

"May I please get one bottle of high potion and two potions? And may I also trouble you to put the high potion into a regular bottle? I'm visiting a friend today and I didn't want to cause any more worries, you see."

"Of course! Let me get that for you right away." The clerk ran to the back to get his order. The few other people in the room looked at them but didn't challenge them otherwise. Normally, the dispensary would never transfer a potion into a different bottle, which prevented people from counterfeiting potions as more expensive high potions. But since it was the other way around, he said he was trying to do something nice for an ill friend. He was a Beast Hunter, so it seemed like she was willing to help him out. Volf was glad she hadn't made a fuss.

High potions were more potent than standard potions, and the price reflected it—fifteen gilt silver versus five—and Volf figured neither Marcella nor Irma would have an easy time accepting one from him. Disguising it as a potion might make them feel better. Worst-case scenario, he'd unseal the bottle and hand it to them. It should help Irma a bit, even if she wouldn't be able to keep it down for too long. Volf knew from experience that high potions could prolong someone's final hours; the knights even called them "succor for the dead." Nevertheless, it was worth a shot.

Once he had the potions in his hands, Volf briskly walked back to the waiting room. "Here, Marcella. Give these to Irma when you go see her. Crack open the top and have her drink as much as she can handle."

"Much obliged, Volf." Marcella bowed again—*how many times has it been today?*

"If you don't mind talking about it, could you tell me what the priests said?"

“They said we can either give up on the baby or keep up with the healing magic. Either way, it’ll be a big strain on Irma. The priests might be able to save the child if it’s in her body until the last possible moment.” It was one or the other. The two of them sank into silence until familiar footsteps came their way.

“Dahlia! How, um, did Irma...”

“She’s made up her mind on giving birth. And I support her.”

“But that means she’s gonna—”

“Marcella, there should be a way to save both Irma and your child. It’s not uncommon for there to be a big magical difference between a noble couple, so there must be some sort of tool or spell to help. I’ll ask the professor for help.”

“Marcella, I might not seem like it, but I’m a noble too. I’ll ask my family. If they don’t have anything for us, then I’ll ask my squad. Our captain’s a marquis, and he should know something too. Until we figure something out, have Irma drink the potions and keep up the treatment.”

“The healin’ magic costs five gilt silver a day; I’m not sure how long we can...”

To Dahlia, that was fifty thousand yen a day. And depending on Irma’s condition, the potions would run about the same. It was certainly no small sum for commoners. But Dahlia had built up some savings in her personal account, and the company had some leeway too—it should be doable for her. There was always the option of working overtime or, if need be, kowtowing.

“I’ll front the cash. I’ve got some savings.”

“That’s...” But Marcella had been too slow to stop Volf.

Dahlia added, “We’ll lend you the money. You’re a guarantor of my company too, so let us take care of you. I know you’ll pay me back, even if you owe me for the rest of your life, right, Marcella?”

“Yeah. You got that right.”

“We’ll figure something out. Look after Irma for us in the meantime.”

Marcella looked as though some of the clouds hanging over his head had dispersed, and after some brief conversation, Dahlia and Volf parted ways with him.

The rain had stopped falling, but to the east, the firmament was clad in crimson. Even with a coat, the cold stung the skin.

“I’ll send a messenger to the professor first thing at dawn and see what he says,” Dahlia said.

“I’ll go talk with my brother; he should know something. If not, I’ll ask the captain,” explained Volf. “Take my coach, Dahlia. Faster if I take a horse home anyway.”

“Thanks, Volf.”

“Save your thanks for now. When Marcella and Irma can smile and laugh again, then they can thank me instead. I’ll send a messenger to your place or to Oswald’s. You can fill in the driver too.”

“Okay. I hope your conversation with Lord Guido goes well. I’ll ask Professor Oswald what our quickest way forward is.” Dahlia was sure Marcella and Irma were stressed out already, so she knew she had to be their pillar and to hold strong, lest everything spiral out of control. Then—

“Dahlia,” Volf called out, gently brushing her arm. “I’m sure everything’s going to be all right. We know people, you and I.”

“Right.” She nodded and took a deep breath before giving him a smile. He returned one of his own.

Volf was a member of both an earl family and the Order of Beast Hunters. Dahlia was the Beast Hunters’ advisor, a chairwoman, and a magical toolmaker. The two of them were surely more likely to have the connections to save their friend Irma than just the two commoners on their own.



It wasn’t long before Dahlia found herself in the drawing room of Oswald’s mansion. She had sent her message early in the morning, even before the Goddess’s Right Eye would be open for business, but he and his wife Ermelinda had gone to pick Dahlia up as soon as they received her letter saying she had something urgent to discuss. Now, Dahlia apologized for the suddenness of the matter, then asked him about hypermageia caused by a disparity in magic between a couple.

Before Oswald answered her question, he asked Ermelinda to excuse him, then took the conversation into a different room. At the other side of the table, he engaged his anti-eavesdropping device, then continued. “Let’s see. How much magic does this couple have?”

“The father is at grade fourteen while the mother is at two.”

“I assume the father is a nobleman and the mother is a commoner—or perhaps she is a woman from the red-light district?”

“They are both commoners and they are a real married couple, though the husband’s father may possibly be a nobleman.”

“Dahlia,” Oswald said quietly, as his usual gentle smile vanished, “this is surely something with which it is better if you do not get involved. If the couple is happy, then you ought to let sleeping dogs lie.”

“That is not what my friends wish for, nor is it what I wish for.” There was no chance that Irma would give up. Dahlia didn’t want to give up either. Despite his stern look, she plucked up her courage to ask Oswald, “Is there a magical tool for pregnant women suffering from hypermageia?”

“There is, but it requires compound enchantment with a variety of rare materials. It is commonly understood that a difference of over ten grades of magic makes it an impossibility to have a child, so any tool that could overcome such an issue would consequently be very difficult to craft.”

“Is it something that you or other companies sell?”

“No, it is something tailored to the mother, taking into account her magic and her capacity. I have heard that noble families place their commissions months before their marriage.” More bad news—Irma didn’t have that much time.

Dahlia wondered if Oswald or herself couldn’t make one too. “Um, would you be able to craft one on such short notice?” She knew how impolite she was being.

“Not on my own; it takes two magical toolmakers. But if you and I were to work on it together? Hm. Only one way to find out,” he replied, reading between the lines. Then he looked straight at her with his silvery eyes. “If the father has such enormous capacity, he might be descended from a family of

marquis rank or higher. That is to say, you may very well get mixed up in trouble from the day of the child's birth—trouble that even Sir Volfred might not be able to deflect for you. Despite all that, Dahlia, do you still want to help the couple?"

"I still do..." It was only now she understood that she might bring Oswald trouble. She realized how unreasonable her request was, and she stood up and bowed deeply. "Forgive me, professor, for potentially involving you too. If this should cause any trouble for you, I ask only that you teach me the process. I'll return home and find someone to work with me. I will distance myself from you as well. But, please, I beg that you lend me your aid!"

She had yet to raise her head when Oswald sighed softly. "How can I say no when my cute student asks so sincerely? Go on, drag me into your troubles."

"I'm sorry! And thank you, professor!" Dahlia bounced back upright.

"Let us move to the workshop. I should like to know the couple's ages, professions, physiques, constitution, and anything else you can think of that would be helpful, so that we may tailor the specifications to them," he said. "Oh, I forgot to ask—what condition is the mother in? And do you know what grade magic she has now?"

"Eight since she became pregnant. The child seems to have powerful earth magic, and so her fingers have begun crystallizing at the tips..."

"Is she receiving healing magic?"

"Yes, she's at the temple now."

"If even the priests cannot prevent her fingers from crystallizing, then we truly don't have much time. It will be dangerous once she crosses the seven day mark." Physical injuries, burns, and the like could only be cured by magic and potions within a week of the initial trauma; after that, the victim would have to wait for their body to heal naturally.

"My friend Irma, well, she's an expert hairdresser and today's the fourth day already. I know I'm asking for a lot, but..."

"It wouldn't do if an expert hairdresser could no longer wield her scissors; I must undertake this task for the sake of all the beauties of the capital," he joked

when tears began welling up in her eyes. “Work begins later today and will continue through the night. I shall give you a note with all the necessary materials, so please bring whatever you have from your home. I shall also contact Ivano and tell him that you will be here for two days; my wives will take turns acting as our chaperones, so he needn’t take time out of his busy day.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Don’t forget to tell Sir Volfred that you will be here. We wouldn’t want him to worry.”

“We should be fine on that front—he’s friends with the couple too, so he knows about everything already. And, um...” Dahlia paused for a moment. “Sorry to be so forward, but how much will you charge me, professor? I’m dead set on paying you back.” Rare materials, loss of business for two days, and his personal time—she knew she would have to smash open her piggy bank.

“I shall charge you the cost of the materials and one case of scorpio. As for the rest, may I ask for something other than money?”

“Of course.”

“Then when I perform maintenance on and craft large magical tools, may I ask that you and my son Raulaere help?”

“Sure, but I don’t see how you would gain from that.”

“Oh, but I would. I don’t run a charity, you see; even if it takes a long time, your services will pay for the cost incurred. And to do so, I shall need you to get better and better as a magical toolmaker. Oh, and, erm, as a chairperson as well.” When they had met at the Adventurer’s Guild last time and Oswald had congratulated her for becoming baroness, he’d said her undisguised reaction demonstrated a need for more training—something which Dahlia had already long forgotten.

Her face stiffened as she tried to smile as best as she could. “O-Oh, yes. Couldn’t be more excited, ha ha...”



Earlier in the morning, when Volf had gone to the Scalfarotto estate to have a servant send his brother a message, Guido and Jonas had appeared and had

Volf join them on the coach ride towards the castle.

“Sorry to bother you while you have so much on your plate, Guido,” Volf said, sitting across from his brother. Guido must’ve taken the conversation on the road because he was too busy to make time for Volf.

“Not at all. I heard you had something urgent; is something the matter?”

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about. I’m hoping you can tell me if there is a way to treat a woman with low magic who has a case of hypermageia caused by her pregnancy, as the father of the child has much more magic than her.”

Guido stared blankly at him before blinking just once. “You have about grade twelve magic and Chairwoman Rossetti has nine, right? I don’t see what you have to worry about.”

“It’s not me and Dahlia!” Volf’s shouting reverberated within the walls of the coach as Jonas, sitting beside Guido, stifled a few coughs.

“Sorry. The joke was in poor taste. Anyway, how big is the difference between said couple?”

“Twelve—the husband is at fourteen and the wife at two.” However, his answer caused both Guido and Jonas to knit their brows.

“Volf, I’m telling you this is for your own good: do not get involved in a dispute within another clan.”

“Both of them are commoners, actually. They’re my good friends, and I really, really want to help them.”

“Hmm... Tell me more.”

Volf explained Marcella and Irma’s story and situation. “So, that’s the gist of it. Is there a way to treat the mother’s hypermageia?”

“There is a magical tool that can absorb excess mana from the body, and that would protect both mother and child. The problem is that it isn’t something that ordinary people can get their hands on. As it takes time to craft such a bespoke item, it’s usually made in preparation for the pregnancy.”

“Dahlia went to Chairman Zola to inquire about this tool too.”

“If it’s the two of them, then there just might be hope...” Guido placed his fingers on his chin and cast his blue eyes downwards. “It’s no more than a stopgap measure, but having a mage cast strengthening magic on the mother once a day should increase her magic resistance, thereby slowing the crystallization. I’ll send someone over before the end of the day.”

“Brother, thank you so much!”

But Guido didn’t return Volf’s smile. “Again, the mother will need to be cured before long, or else the crystallization will be permanent and potentially even affect her internally. It would be best to give her full recovery magic once, considering the potential complications in the future. However, the only ones capable of that are elite mages who serve as royal physicians, high priests, or high-ranking silver stoles...”

“Would it be possible for the family to ask for a favor?”

“It’s not that simple. It takes connections and money, of course. But Volf, as wealthy as our family may be, we simply cannot help everyone in need. You understand that we cannot carelessly extend a hand, even if they are your friends?” Guido looked at him as though he were sitting a child down.

“Yes, I do...” Volf understood well; the Nuvolaris were commoners and friends of his, but they had no relation to the family. “Um, would it be a good idea to ask Lady Altea about this matter?”

“I know how you must feel, Volf, but can you afford it?”

Volf paused before answering. “No.”

“If you cannot afford it, then the family will eventually have to absorb the cost. Remember, among nobles, no favor goes unrepaired.”

His brother’s unusually icy tone drove home how naive Volf had been. All that Volf could afford to give was the money he had saved up, and the dowager duchess Altea needed neither his money nor his power. Incurring any further debts might jeopardize the family, yet he truly wanted Irma to get the treatment she needed to prevent any lingering health conditions from the crystallization even after delivery.

Guido continued, “There is a way, though, Volf. However, it might mean that

you could no longer claim the couple as your ‘good friends.’”

“That is fine. Anything to save both mother and child.”

“Convince the father to serve the Scalfarotto family as a knight.”

“Serve us as a knight? But he’s currently working for the Couriers’ Guild.” Marcella had even said that he’d barely ever used earth magic before; Volf couldn’t see Marcella having an easy time switching careers. In fact, the family would undeniably have a hard time making use of a complete novice.

“Once he’s under our family name, send him to the Rossetti Trading Company. Madam Rossetti has been searching for a guard lately, hasn’t she? That role would be perfect for a friend she trusts. Still, it would require some expedited training. But in the end, he would be protecting the company of which you are a guarantor and the chairwoman of whom I am a guardian—we would not be blamed for helping our retainer’s wife.”

“Thank you, Guido! Thank you so much...” Volf was at a loss for other words. He couldn’t have possibly come up with an idea like that on his own.

“Furthermore, we ought to shelter the child to be born.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t have any doubts that the child will have very powerful magic. With commoner parents, they would have a big target painted on their back. We’ll have to spread word that there is a plan for them to go through college, become a mage or magical toolmaker, then work for the Scalfarotto family. Putting the child under our aegis should alleviate some of the interference and harassment. Of course, after they grow up, they are free to decide whether or not to work for us; there is no point in forcing anyone to be a retainer.”

“Wow...” There was so much that Volf had failed to consider. Jonas, though, looked to be completely unbothered—this must be how Guido or nobles in general acted. If anything, it was a little embarrassing that Volf was surprised; there was so much he didn’t know about this world.

“One last thing: have the husband enter a magical contract to obey and never to harm the Scalfarotto family and Madam Rossetti.”

“Marcella is someone we’d never have to worry about.”

“Volf, you have to understand that you can never trust that ‘never.’ If a man like Marcella has his beloved wife kidnapped, can you say for sure that he won’t betray our family?”

“I...”

“Even with every protective accessory under the sun, there are things against which we cannot defend. As trustworthy as he may be, we cannot be sure about every other person in the world—there needs to be deterrence.”

The way he broke it down persuaded Volf. It might rub Marcella the wrong way, but it was a necessary evil. “I’ll go to my unit later and ask for some time off, and then I’ll go talk to Marcella.”

“Go do that. I’ll apologize to Lord Grato for the sudden family emergency.”

“Sorry to have you do that for me. And thank you for everything, Guido. I’ll repay—”

“Nonsense. We are brothers, you and I. The only thing you should be thinking of is what estervino to buy to celebrate afterwards.”

“Right!”

Guido, with a bit of a dazzling smile, watched his brother alight after the coach came to a halt.

The attendant silently closed the door after him. “Guido...”

“Let me guess, Jonas, you’ve got something to complain about again, don’t you?” the master asked with a strained smile.

“Damned if I don’t. Whatever will we say to your father...?” His brow twisted into a knot.

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll grumble and lecture me. But think about it—grade fourteen earth magic, and we might be able to raise it some more. How interesting it’d be to combine it with our family’s powerful water magic; frankly, it would be a waste not to take him in. And imagine what high-ranking nobility he might be descended from. Isn’t it so exciting? Gotta run a few checks on him

before this all goes through...”

“‘Interesting’? ‘Exciting’? ‘Troublesome’ is the word you’re looking for.”

“Children or even grandchildren of a retainer with powerful magic protected by a new marquis—I wonder how things will play out. I think enticing proposals for adoption or marriage should come our way in the future. I can’t wait.”

Jonas glared with his rust-colored eyes at Guido, then heaved a heavy sigh. “You truly have become such a nobleman.”

“Such high praise from you. Thank you. I’d like to think I’ll become even more marquis-like by next year.” Guido smiled softly as he peered out the window in the direction that his brother had gone, but Volf’s tall figure was no longer in sight.



Back at the temple, Volf asked a priest to fetch Marcella, then the two of them moved to a small room for visiting family. Volf activated his anti-eavesdropper and got straight to the point. “Forgive me for asking this of you, Marcella, but to save Irma’s life, I want you to serve my family as a knight.”

Not a question but a request—Marcella’s eyes, brown like a kite, grew large and round before he turned his troubled look onto Volf. “If it’s to save Irma’s life, then I’d be right happy to. But a knight? I don’t know the first thing ’bout manners or magic, so how am I supposed to be any use to you?”

“You’ll quit your job at the Couriers’ Guild, and then the Scalfarotto family will dispatch you to the Rossetti Trading Company, whereupon you will serve as bodyguard to the chairwoman, namely Dahlia. I know I can trust you, and you have strengthening and earth magic. You’ll still have to complete training, but I don’t think there’s anyone more suited to this task,” Volf explained. “But know that bodyguarding is not a safe job.”

“I understand, and I’m grateful. You might have the wrong idea that us couriers ain’t used to danger. Not exactly uncommon that we have to defend ourselves when we make deliveries to nobles or wealthy merchants. Oh, and, uh, keep this a secret from Irma and Dahlia, will you?” His usual smile was good to see.

“There’s also your future child. They will very likely have powerful magic, and that will make them a target. Right from their birth, we ask you to say that they will attend college, become a mage or magical toolmaker, then work for the Scalfarotto family. Rest assured that your child will have a choice after they grow up.”

“Gotcha. Thanks for being so thorough about everythin’. I guess the whole world will find out how much magic the kid’ll have after the school entrance exam; never had to worry ’bout that myself since my magic came so late.”

Even with late-blooming magic, grade fourteen earth magic would get solicitations for adoption or marriage from the rich and powerful. Marcella had managed to avoid all of that because he cherished what he already had and never thought about making a living off of his magic. He kept his head down at the Couriers’ Guild, was a good husband to his wife Irma, and lived a happy, magic-free life. But now Volf was here to tear down that peace and quiet with his offer. Still, if it was to save Irma and their child, neither Marcella, Dahlia, nor himself would cower in fear.

“One last thing—and I’m really sorry about this—I’ll need you to sign a contract at the temple, swearing that you’ll obey and never bring harm to the Scalfarotto family and Dahlia.”

“Yeah, sure. That ain’t nothin’ to be sorry ’bout.”

There wasn’t a moment of indecision in Marcella’s smile, which surprised Volf. “I ought to be, Marcella. I’m taking you away from the job you’ve known for so long, and working for your friend’s family can’t be a comfortable proposition either.”

“All I am is grateful. Or maybe, *Wolf*, you find it hard to call someone working for your family a friend?”

Wolf—that was what Marcella called him whenever they went out drinking in the city, and Volf had already become accustomed to the name, which obscured his family background. “That’s not it. My feelings won’t change. Neither will Dahlia’s, I’m sure.”

The image of Jonas standing behind Guido popped up in Volf’s mind. Guido had introduced Jonas to Volf as a friend first, attendant second. Jonas would

speaking very politely when there was company around, but when he and Guido were alone, they were just buddies. So maybe if Volf were very lucky, he and Marcella could be the same way. Or perhaps Volf was hoping for too much.

Marcella's calm voice overlapped with the thoughts in Volf's mind. "So it ain't gonna be so different after all."

A wave of relief washed over Volf, bringing a smile to his face. "I'll send word to my brother that I've got your consent so that he can get someone to cast full recovery on Irma as soon as possible. Dahlia is at her magical toolmaking teacher's place, so that's where I'll head afterwards."

"A magical tool, huh? I'm thankful for it, but tell Dahlia not to push herself too hard."

"No can do. Dahlia's a magical toolmaker. She'll push herself as hard as she can if it's for Irma's sake."

"Volf..."

"She did the same for me." The fairy glass lenses affixed to the spectacles in his hands glimmered a faint blue—a magical tool that concealed his eye-catching golden eyes and turned them into a gentle green. She'd known that crafting them would drain her magic and energy, yet she had done so with no hesitancy and then handed them to him with a big smile. "Dahlia made these glasses for me. It was with these that I was allowed to get my first taste of walking around freely in public. I had long since resigned myself to my fate, but there she was to save me. And it's not just these glasses; she's made many other magical tools too. Toolmaking is hard work, dangerous work."

"Yeah, and that's why you've gotta hold her back. Irma is the most important person to me, but if anything happened to Dahlia—well, Volf, you're the one who's gotta stop her before anything like that happens!"

"The magical toolmaker Dahlia does not wish for that." Volf knew that no matter how terrible the crafting process may have been, there was no way she would stop on his account. Hell, she may very well snap at him. "If the magical tool is for Irma, then Dahlia will put her heart and soul into making it. She has a skilled teacher, Ivano, me, and my brother behind her. If she gets exhausted, then we'll have her chug a potion. If she's out of magic, then a mana potion. If

she gets hurt, we'll take her here. For as long as her work doesn't threaten her life, I will do nothing to stop her."

It was as though he said all that to convince himself of what he needed to do. Volf stood up and continued, "Marcella, our role this time is to cheer her on, to encourage her. That's all we can do."

"It just pisses me off that while Irma's pregnant and Dahlia's craftin' away, I'm sitting and waiting..." He followed Volf's lead and stood up as well. "I'm gonna head to the temple and offer a prayer. Times like these, I oughta beg the gods a little, right? Come too, Volf?"

Volf placed a beat before his reply in the affirmative, which Marcella seemed to appreciate. The main building was right next door, so it wouldn't delay Volf from sending Guido a message for too long. But the temple proper wasn't a place that Volf enjoyed. Whether it was because people said his eyes were not a curse but a blessing or because he had wept here after his mother's passing, he did not know, but it had long since become a place that unsettled him. Today, though, with Marcella by his side, he prayed in earnest—for Irma, their child, Dahlia's success, and that he may see the day when the four of them could enjoy each other's company around the dinner table again.

The Senior Apprentice and the Magic-Leeching Bracelet

Before she returned home from Oswald's mansion, Dahlia had dropped by the Merchants' Guild to get Ivano up to date. As crafting the magical tool might bring him—the other half of the company—into the thick of things, she had felt the need to apologize and explain the situation with respect to Marcella, the magical tool, the danger from the nobility, the potential impact on the company, and everything else. Ivano had not a single word of criticism for her and instead gladly offered to attend to the business, as well as heartfelt wishes for the best for Irma. He said he would visit them at Oswald's after wrapping up the day's work. Then, at the tower, Dahlia had gathered her overalls and the materials on her list. She was fully aware how frantic and drained she must have looked. The well-built driver had extended his hand and helped out with loading the coach. Now, she was finally back in the mansion.

Oswald, dressed in a set of white work clothes, set down a few magically sealed boxes, presumably containing crafting materials. "A pregnant woman with hypermageia must have the excess magic extracted from her body. With the wide disparity between her and the father, a ring would most likely be too small, so we shall be making a magic-leeching bracelet."

"All right!"

There was no need for a longer introduction, and the toolmaking duo went over the plan. "The mother is at grade two, but the magic the child has discharged has her up to grade eight. We will need to extract the excess magic from the child to protect the mother. Moreover, we will need to prevent further crystallization from the earth magic and stabilize the effects of the magic disparity in order to protect both mother and child. Lastly, we will need to implement a function to discharge the stored magic, as the bracelet can only absorb and hold so much."

The five necessary enchantments were as follows: magic leech, crystallization

prevention, protection for the pregnant woman, protection for the fetus, and magic discharge. Any one of them sounded difficult; all of them together sounded impossible. Or at least, it would have been, if Dahlia had been working alone.

Oswald continued, “The materials we shall be using are sköll fang for magic leech, cockatrice beak to prevent crystallization due to excess earth magic, horn from a female unicorn to stabilize the mother’s condition and rejuvenate her, horn from a male bicorn to deceive the fetus into thinking the mother has enough magic, and basilisk talon to discharge the magic.”

Dahlia had brought all the materials she had at home, such as the sköll fang and parts from a unicorn and a mutant bicorn. Fortunately, Oswald had cockatrice beaks and basilisk talons in stock, and, if they were to run out, he said he could procure more from the Adventurers’ Guild.

“With how much magic there is coursing through the mother, we shall need to make the bracelet out of mythril. The inside will be split into four sections to be enchanted with the various materials. To prevent magical interference, we will apply the unicorn horn to each section as a barrier, then enchant the obverse with basilisk talon to balance it out. The healing powers of unicorn horn would be the safest for a pregnant woman,” explained Oswald. That method of preventing interference was something that Dahlia had only just now learned, and she felt a little guilty that in spite of the emergency, her first thought was that she could use the same technique in making Volf a magical sword. “Do you have any questions?”

“Will the magic stored in the mythril bracelet be converted back to aether by the basilisk talon?” Dahlia wondered how the mythril and basilisk talon would play together.

“No, it will not. The mother will have to use earth magic once a day to discharge the magic stored up. It should be intuitive, and she should only need to do so for the duration of her pregnancy.” Bizarrely enough, that meant Irma would become a temporary earth mage. “I must also apologize—I have never crafted this magic-leeching bracelet before, and considering your magic and mine, I can only give it a fifty-fifty chance of success.”

“Right...”

“That said, we do have some extra material for trial and error. And if we are not successful, you can try asking Captain Bartolone of the Order of Beast Hunters to introduce you to a healing mage. Keep your chin up, okay?” Oswald offered some silver lining, as he must’ve seen through her—with how dire the talk was, it was natural that Dahlia was tense. The more time she spent with him, the more of a professor he seemed. “I’ll have you use magic to whittle down the cockatrice beak into a flat disk that will fit in the bracelet. Two things to be careful about: do not use too much magic on it and do not forget your protection against petrification.”

“I can’t imagine it would be easier to craft this bracelet with my hands turned into solid stone.”

“You wouldn’t be able to turn door knobs or open windows, leading to a very difficult time asking for help. I cannot recommend it,” he said with a straight face. But Dahlia couldn’t hide her smirk; she hadn’t thought he would have a first-hand account for her. “We have a few of the beaks, so why don’t you give it a try, Dahlia?”

“Can I really? Thank you!” The cockatrice was a monster with the head of a rooster and the body of a serpent. It differed slightly from the ones in the legends of her previous world, where she had read a book that described them as having the body and wings of a dragon. Here, they were real, and their wings were small and their torsos more like a lizard’s. To be fair, dragons in this world were considered large lizards, so perhaps there wasn’t much of a difference after all.

“I shall roughly hew it with a saw to form the correct shape for you. You will then affix it to the bracelet, sprinkle it with the powdered unicorn horn, and apply a fixing spell.” In Oswald’s hand was the lower mandible of what looked to be a mere rooster’s beak—dark yellow on the exterior and orange on the interior. He handed it to Dahlia for her to examine, and she found it to be as hard as metal; a peck from a cockatrice would inflict more than just pain. Oswald took a magical toolmaking saw to the beak, and within moments, he had a small yellow disk.

Mythril was a silvery metal that shimmered in blue if it caught the light right; the cold look wasn't something Dahlia had seen in her previous life. The bracelet had a hinge in the middle and metal clasps at the ends. There were cutouts on the inside of the band, ready to receive enchantments. Dahlia, being very careful to not drop it, slotted the thin disk of horn in. Next, she streamed magic out from the index finger on her right hand to first engrave a magical circuit, then connect the anti-petrification module. That much was easy. After checking that magic could flow through the circuit, Dahlia proceeded to sprinkle the ground unicorn horn on top. It adhered to the cockatrice beak as soon as she applied magic to it, meaning that she managed to avoid getting the pure white powder everywhere. With the fixing spell properly done, the beak disk glowed a faint yellow.

"Very well done on both counts."

"Thank you." The words of praise allowed her to finally relax her shoulders. However, that was just one of five enchantments to do—no time to rest.

"Let us do the sköll next. Did you happen to bring any from your home?"

"Yes, I had one." Dahlia opened the magically sealed box, and Oswald removed his glasses to examine the silver fang, which glimmered in gold.

"We should be able to handle a sköll fang of this size with our powers combined. With such a big difference in magic between the couple, your larger pieces would be better suited than mine. We shall saturate it with our magic until it crystallizes, then affix it to the bracelet. But first, let us get some help for safety's sake." When Oswald opened the workshop door, he called for Ermelinda, who was just welcoming in a certain raven-haired guest. The synchronicity of it all was frankly a little shocking. "Welcome, Sir Volfred. I apologize for springing this upon you, but may I ask for your assistance to ensure Miss Dahlia's safety while we complete our work?"

"Uh, sure..."

"And Mel, could you help me please?"

"Yes, of course," she replied.

Their greetings were cut short by the pending work, and the two assistants

headed into the workshop. It must've been quite the sight for Volf, as his golden eyes darted around in shock. It was easily ten times the size of the tower's. The glossy, light gray marble flooring and all the magically sealed boxes on the floor-to-ceiling shelves made it paradise for any magical toolmaker.

"Dahlia and I will combine our magic to crystallize this sköll fang. If either one of us collapses or faints, I ask that you pull the table away from us. No need to be gentle about it either," instructed Oswald.

"Sköll fang...?" Volf immediately had a look of concern on his face.

Dahlia smiled, hoping to reassure him. "We want to use sköll fang because it can absorb the magic from Irma, and so we need to crystallize it by pouring magic into it first. Plus, I have Professor Oswald working with me this time, so I'm sure we'll be fine."

"By all calculations, we should be well within the range of the capacity needed, but it is always good to be prepared, lest we slump over near the fang," Oswald said. Behind him stood Ermelinda and behind Dahlia stood Volf. The sudden and unexpected audience—and the fact it was Volf too—gave Dahlia a bit of stage fright. "Please step in if either of us collapses or faints, but do not do anything otherwise."

"Very well."

"Understood."

While Dahlia rolled up her sleeves twice, Oswald removed his gloves. He said, "We will do it in one go. I shall bring us mana potions afterwards."

"Thank you."

Though both of them favored their right hands, Oswald pointed with the pad of his thumb and Dahlia pointed her first two fingers as she lightly clenched the rest of her digits. A toolmaker's grip was a very personal thing. Unlike mages, not many employed wands, staves, or rings to project their power but instead held their hands in whichever way made it easiest for them to manipulate their magic. Dahlia had learned her grip from her father, and that was the grip she still used today.

"We commence." Oswald led the enchantment process and beamed his

magic—like a silver breeze mixed with rainbow dust—into the sköll fang.

Dahlia followed his lead, emitting a semi-transparent multicolored stream. However, because of the recent increase in her power, her output was somewhat unstable. She tried her best to prevent her magic from fluttering and rippling like a ribbon.

The fang continued to take in both the silver and the rainbow lights, and it shook and shimmered slightly brighter. The four of them observed silently. It should've only been a matter of time before it crystallized, but after seven or eight minutes, it was obvious to the pair of toolmakers that they had been entirely too optimistic.

"Hm. This fell outside of our calculations. It is clear that we were somewhat naive going into this." Sweat dripped down Oswald's neck as he failed to hide his frown—the enchantment was taking a lot out of him.

It should have already been more than enough magic by now, even if Oswald had been working alone. But even so, the fang disappointingly remained unchanged. Dahlia wondered if it didn't come from a mutant specimen; it wouldn't be discernible by sight, and she wouldn't know even though she had used the same fang last time. If it were a fang from a mutant sköll, Dahlia would certainly be one of the luckiest people alive—she had somehow crafted Volf's bracelet without suffering any major repercussions.

"Hngk!" Suddenly, Dahlia's magic was draining twice as quickly. The fang must've preferred hers over Oswald's, and it latched onto and plundered the magic out of her body.

"Dahlia, ease off!"

"I'm fine!" she shouted back, despite perhaps not being very fine at all.

That was all the sköll fang she had left—she did not have any spares—and it was larger than anything Oswald had. That should mean it would be better for Irma. Besides, if she were to stop, she wouldn't have enough magic for all the tasks that remained to do afterwards. Dahlia also wouldn't want Oswald to chug a mana potion and keep on going; he was already four over his starting grade—any more and he would be repeating Carlo's mistakes.

Dahlia stared at the fang, gritted her teeth, and calmed her magic. With her new powers, she should have easily been able to safely go up one grade higher. Irma only had grade two and was withstanding grade eight magic; now was the time for Dahlia to be brave. As she desperately continued to pump magic into the fang, her arms started trembling. She had a bit more to give, but the strain was causing her legs to cramp.

“Dahlia!”

“Sorry, Volf! Prop me up!” This would normally never happen, as being connected with someone else might influence the output, but Volf was incapable of expressing his magic—there was no chance of his magic being mixed into the stream or weakening hers. Even though her arms were beginning to cramp as well, and even though she almost couldn’t stand anymore, she was still conscious and she could still stream her magic.

“On it!” Volf supported her right hand and braced her body against his. “Is this okay?”

“Perfect!” Now that she didn’t have to worry about collapsing to the ground, she could concentrate entirely on the enchantment. Dahlia raised her left arm and pointed her fingers towards the fang. Her head started to spin, but she powered through it. Just as the sköll demanded, she pulled out all the stops and unleashed everything she had. The rainbow stream that came from her fingers had never been more powerful.



“No magical toolmaker would surrender to their materials. Let us turn the tables,” Oswald said, probably smiling or laughing.

But Dahlia had no way of knowing as the sweat dripping from her brow stung her eyes. All she could tell was that he had both arms aimed towards the fang, and the silver twinkled in her blurred vision. After seconds or minutes—time had already lost any meaning—the magic began to rebound and the fang would not take any more. Dahlia hurried to wipe her eyes so she could take a look at the results for herself: atop the sealsilver-lacquered plate on the workbench was a small, round silver crystal that had a ball of rainbow light revolving very quickly inside it, evoking the image of a small child twirling and dancing.

Oswald donned his silver gloves again and very carefully inserted the crystal into the back of the mythril bracelet. Then, just as Dahlia had done earlier, he spread the unicorn horn on top and fixed it with magic; the powder clung to the crystal, flashing once with a bluish-white light. “And that completes the sköll enchantment.”

“Thank goodness!” As soon as the wave of relief washed over her, Dahlia’s knees gave out and she crumpled to the floor.

“Dahlia!” Volf shouted.

“I-I’m fine.” She managed to get those words out, though she couldn’t manage to get upright. Even with Volf’s support—he didn’t dare loosen his grip on her—it took Dahlia everything to keep her head from flopping down. The worst part was that her fatigue was so obvious, she knew there was no excuse to simply gloss over it.

“You ought to rest in the other room,” Oswald said. “Sir Volfred, Miss Dahlia seems to be rather exhausted. Could I have you carry her over?”

“Yes, of course.” Volf, expecting no protest, scooped her up into his arms.

It wasn’t as though she could have protested even if she’d wanted to, but Dahlia did feel a bit pathetic to have been reduced to a sack of potatoes. She then felt rather self-conscious. Not only had she gained a bit of weight from having too many good meals lately, she was drenched in so much sweat that her makeup must’ve been ruined too. Dahlia couldn’t help but apologize under

the combination of embarrassment and guilt. “I’m, um, probably kinda heavy. Sorry.”

Volf shook his head, flashing a pleased smile that she had last seen against the backdrop of a starry sky. “Hey, you’re not heavy at all.”

After Volf deposited Dahlia on the couch in the lounge adjoining the workshop, she received from Ermelinda a bottle each of health potion and mana potion and did her best to finish them. Ermelinda then accompanied Oswald as he went to change his clothes, leaving Dahlia and Volf alone in the room. He took the lull to explain how Irma needed a round of complete recovery treatment and that Marcella had agreed to become a knight for their family at Guido’s suggestion. Dahlia was happy to learn that Irma’s fingers would fully recover and that they would raise Irma’s magic resistance to provide her with some more protection. They also discussed the magic leech bracelet that Oswald and Dahlia were crafting together. It was certainly no simple endeavor, but this time, Volf was happy to learn its success would ensure the safety of both Irma and her child.

“You’re absolutely exhausted. Lie down for a bit, or at least until Oswald gets back.” Volf must’ve seen it on her face, despite her best efforts to hide it.

Obediently, Dahlia lay down and borrowed the throw that was there already. Even after downing the pair of potions, the fatigue haunted her, and so she took the moment to recover a little. “All that’s left is the unicorn horn, bicorn horn, and the basilisk talon. With the professor’s help, I’m sure we’ll be just fine.”

“Yeah. I’ll be praying for you, just in case.” The tone of his response made it evident he was still worried.

“You don’t need to be so worried for me, Volf. I drank the potions, didn’t I?”

“Marcella asked me to make sure you don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I, um, I’m not! I just ran a little low on magic, that’s all...” Dahlia’s voice trailed off. Given that she was unable to move without Volf carrying her, she couldn’t really refute him.

“But I’m not about to do anything to stop you either. You’re a magical toolmaker. This is what you have to do.” His golden eyes should’ve been so familiar, but Dahlia had never seen them so tinged with pain. “Honestly, I want to stop you right now. But just as you’ve never told me to quit the Scarlet Armors, I’m not about to tell you to quit.”

It was true that she had never said it, but she had thought it before. Heck, she would have preferred that he resign not only from the Scarlet Armors but even the Order of Beast Hunters. She would have preferred that he live life a little safer. But she couldn’t say it, and especially not now.

Volf continued, “I know you’ll push yourself to the brink if it’s for Marcella and Irma, but there’s Oswald here this time, and I’ve brought you potions as well. Even if you pass out or hurt yourself, I’ll take you to the temple right away. So, Dahlia, follow your heart.”

“Thank you, Volf.”

He sat on the sofa beside her. “Just as long as you live. For me.” His quiet words sounded like a prayer.

As she was about to say that she was fine and that she wouldn’t die on him, a knock came at the door. After Dahlia and Oswald had some black tea, sandwiches, and other refreshments, the toolmakers made ready to return to the workshop, leaving behind Volf and Oswald’s second wife Fiore in the lounge.

“I am hardly proficient at making conversation, so I hope this will help the time go by a little quicker for you.” Fiore’s pale green eyes curved in a smile as she set down on the coffee table a stack of books on chivalry and arms from various countries. She herself had a handkerchief and tools for her ongoing embroidery project.

Volf thanked her for being so thoughtful, and his smile said that he truly would be interested in those books. Both he and Fiore must keep busy, and it wasn’t as though they had much in common either; Dahlia felt sorry to have them wait.

Back in the workshop now, Dahlia approached the workbench, clipped her hair in place with a barrette, and fired herself up for round two.

“We shall be using the horn of a female unicorn to stabilize the mother’s condition and the horn of a male bicorn to fool the fetus into thinking the mother has enough magic. Once the materials are cut, we shall need to enchant with both at the same time,” Oswald said.

“Would it not work if we were each in charge of one of the horns?”

“Though it will be the mother who wears the bracelet, it will be affecting both mother and child. It’s said that any variance in the magic between the two horns will cause a negative reaction.” Two different streams of magic going into one’s body wouldn’t be great, but Dahlia wondered if it would be possible for one person to enchant twice. Before she could ask, she got her answer. “Even if a magical toolmaker or a mage with high capacity were to do both enchantments, they say the effect would be suboptimal. Some have theorized that the diversity of magic is beneficial, but I know not for certain.”

On the sealed plate atop the workbench was a piece of pure white horn and a piece black as obsidian. “The bicorn was a purple mutant, but that should be better, as the stronger magic will have a better effect. This is a cross-sectional slice of the horn; we must carve it down to a large puck with the magical channel running down the center. We should be able to get four from one horn.”

With saws in their hands, Dahlia got started on the unicorn and Oswald on the bicorn. Though it wasn’t her first time, she was still surprised by just how hard the horn was. The magic emanating from it felt warm to the touch. Being very careful not to let it slip out of her sweaty palms, Dahlia managed to cut two rondelles out. However, Oswald was already finished with all four and had begun examining the bracelet. Dahlia hurried with her sawing, but in her haste, the blade slipped and nicked her left thumb, and a crimson line ran across it. She managed to keep herself from yelping in pain, but she couldn’t escape Oswald’s notice.

“Did you hurt your thumb, Dahlia?”

“No, it’s nothing.” She held her right hand over her injury, but Oswald cracked open a potion for her.

“Give me your hand. Your wound will only impede your work.”

She should've known better than to wave it off, and she did as instructed. Blood dripped from the surprisingly long cut. Dahlia winced as Oswald splashed the potion on her hand drop by drop. "Sorry for troubling you again..."

"Students and problems come hand in hand. Trust me, I would know."

"Are you saying you caused problems for Professor Lina too?"

"Did I ever. Carlo and I got into many messes as members of the research group." Oswald had mentioned before that her father had been quite the rambunctious student and was even nicknamed Uragano, much to the contrary of the image she had of him. However, she couldn't have imagined that Oswald would have been a part of her father's shenanigans too. "I have given myself frostbite from using too many ice crystals in an attempt to freeze things quickly."

"Hm. I can empathize." Dahlia, too, had tried to get her home freezer to be more effective, only to turn its interior into a solid block of ice. After all, trial and error was the lifeblood of all magical toolmakers.

"Once, I wanted to test whether a bangle's antidotal properties really worked, and so I took it off and ingested a poisonous mushroom. By the time I felt anything, I was too late to put the bangle back on. Every time, Professor Lina would bring another teacher with healing magic to help me."

"You mean that was just one of multiple times? You sure were a, uh, proactive student." That meant it had happened more than just once or twice, and Dahlia had been at the point of saying that he was just as bad as her father, but at the last minute, she'd managed to rephrase it in a slightly better way.

"Oh, yes. They called me Tormenta—the blizzard to your father's tempest." A nickname quite fitting for the man with silver hair and eyes. "Though I have to say Professor Lina was the cold one—always shouting at me, the one who got injured. Was she often angry at you when you were her assistant?"

"Not at all. She might warn me from time to time, but she did so very calmly and gently."

"I suppose time erodes sharp edges." Oswald, with a slight smile, splayed his fingers across the sealed plate. Before she knew it, he had already finished

carving the two other unicorn horn pieces. His talk of Professor Lina brought back good memories for Dahlia, and she was even more motivated now. He brought out another sealsilver-painted plate and put one of each kind of horn right against the other; the black contrasting with the white made them look like reversi disks from her previous life. “Now, let us begin enchanting with the two horns.”

Flanking the table, the toolmakers extended their right hands and began the process. The trick was to evenly distribute the magic through both horns, but that was much easier said than done with two people working together. Everyone had their own quirks, and that meant it took some time for them to mesh together. The white unicorn horn finished before the black bicorn horn, but their unstable magic caused speckling and cracks down the middle of the disks.

“It is our first time, after all,” Oswald said.

“I suppose...”

Previously, Dahlia’s magic had been more like a fine, semi-transparent rainbow beam, and she could hold it like that for a while. With her recent growth, though, it had become more like a softly curled ribbon that would intermittently cut out. Oswald’s magic came in regular pulses that were silver in color and mixed with rainbow dust. Their magic seemed to clash.

They moved on to the second set of horns. Though they were now armed with experience, it didn’t mean they could instantly sync up. Oswald tried to up the frequency of his pulses; Dahlia did her best to widen her magic. They blasted the materials, but the sudden spike in magic reduced the unicorn horn to powder. Not only that, but they failed all four attempts.

To avoid overusing their magic, the toolmakers took a break. Oswald suggested that Dahlia take dinner, but she didn’t have the appetite and opted instead to lie down on the couch. Volf sat on the one beside her, but her feelings of defeat and tiredness overpowered her desire to chat with him. Still, having a friend in the same room restored some of her resolve.

Then, Ivano showed up with provisions: scorpio for Oswald, zephyricloth shawls for his three wives, and a box each of cookies and profiteroles. Fiore was

delighted with her present. Dahlia had a single cream puff before suggesting to Volf that he get dinner. As Ivano wouldn't be able to take his place for much longer, they shooed Volf out of the house despite his stubborn refusal.

Only after a few hours did they return to the workshop. Dahlia and Oswald had squandered the materials, and so they carved up another unicorn and bicorn horn to begin enchanting anew. However, when their magic overlapped, the unicorn horn split cleanly into two. It happened again on the next attempt, proving that it was no coincidence.

"Maybe our magic is just too different..." The question was more rhetorical than genuine; the answer was obvious to her. Their magic diametrically opposed one another.

Oswald's grim look said that he must've understood the same. "So it appears. The vast difference makes this rather difficult..." He dabbed the sweat on his forehead with the back of his hand; it was well past midnight and his tiredness showed.

"I'm sorry for wasting your time, professor..."

"Don't say that. Compatibility in magic is a thing, and as your teacher, I should have been better at adapting to you. Unfortunately, I haven't had much experience, as I almost always work alone..." Oswald wrinkled his brow. "Dahlia, would you happen to have a classmate or a work friend who is around your level and could match your magic?"

Her first thought was her father. Their magic was similar in strength and technique, and they had worked together very often. And if it were for Irma's sake, Carlo would've volunteered already. But he wasn't an option. There was only one other person who fit that role, but never had Dahlia thought she would contact him again. "There is someone. Mr. Tobias Orlando and I should be able to work well together, but, erm, would it really be all right to have him here?"

"I have no objections. I only worry that you wouldn't want to work with him."

"I need this magical tool to succeed, professor." For Irma and their child, Dahlia would beg if she needed to, pride be damned. "Besides, he's also a friend

of the couple...” Dahlia wanted to believe in him. Before their separation, Tobias and Marcella had been so close, they’d go out drinking with just each other’s company.

“Very well. Go ask for—no, *borrow* his help. A magical toolmaker like him should answer the call of duty.”

“Thank you. I’ll head out right away,” she said, bowing once before she turned to leave the workshop.

“Dahlia, are you planning to go see Mr. Orlando like this?”

“Well, yes, I should think this urgent...”

“Please don’t. You are going to request the aid of Orlando & Co.’s magical toolmaker as the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company. As urgent as this matter may be, you ought not to visit at dawn with disheveled hair and overalls.” Chairman Zola was right—it wouldn’t be appropriate as chairwoman, and so, when she went to implore his help, it would be as Carlo’s junior apprentice.

“Right. I wasn’t thinking at all. I’ll head home to change, then go in the morning.”

“Good. Sir Volfred, if you could escort Miss Dahlia—”

“Of course.” Volf sprang to his feet and extended his hand, which Dahlia, who was still a little wobbly, took very naturally.



By the time Dahlia had left Oswald’s mansion and returned to her tower, a new day was about to dawn. The first item on her agenda was to brew a pot of weak coffee. She loaded hers with sugar and milk; Volf took his black. With a few easy-to-make items like cheese on toast, sunny-side up eggs, and sausages, they had a light breakfast going.

“Dahlia, you ought to eat a bit more.”

“I’m not really that hungry. And if I eat when I’m nervous, my stomach starts hurting...” She was slightly ashamed to admit how timid she actually was.

“Is that right? I’d always thought you were the type to use stress to your

advantage.”

“You think too highly of me, Volf. I’m just a regular commoner and a scaredy-cat.”

“I don’t believe that for one bit.”

“Anyway! *You* should eat up before the food gets cold. I’ll be the one in trouble if you run out of energy to carry me later.” Dahlia forcefully steered the conversation away from her and toward the meal.

As she sipped on her café au lait, the thoughts in her mind made her head ache. The best step forward would be to go to Orlando & Co., say hi, and ask for Tobias. Before that, she needed to take a shower to wash the reeking sweat off her body, change into something more chairwoman-like, and redo her makeup. Tobias would most likely accept her request, but what she was scratching her head over was how to pay him. That was something to talk to Ivano about. And if working with Tobias didn’t pan out and they exhausted their materials, she’d have to ask Oswald or the Adventurers’ Guild. The coffee could only drown so many of her worries, but even that failed—the cup slipped from her tired hand. “Ack!” Dahlia was prepared to grab a towel, but instead of finding coffee on the table, she found Volf’s hand.

With half a slice of toast dangling from his mouth, he supported her hand that had the cup in it with one of his own and balanced himself on the table with his other. He gently placed the beverage down, then opened a bottle of potion that had been in his bag. “You’re absolutely exhausted, aren’t you? Here, drink this and then get as much sleep as you can.”

“I guess I am. Thank you.” Dahlia didn’t hesitate to take him up on his offer; he had a good point. There were still a few hours before Orlando & Co. opened for business, and so it would be best for her to have the potion, take a nap, then prepare for her day.

“Are you sure about going to Orlando & Co., Dahlia?”

“I’ll be fine. What happened is all history now. Oh, I should probably bring the spellbook too. I doubt I’ll have many chances to see him after this.”

“You don’t have any obligation to, if you ask me.”

“It isn’t as though I can open it. There was a lot father had yet to teach us, and he meant the book for Tobias. I have my own spellbook from Professor Oswald anyway. And, at the end of the day, Tobias and I are apprentices to the same master.” Perhaps the book contained more of Carlo’s teachings. Dahlia shook feelings of envy and jealousy from her mind. “Anyway, I’ll nap for a couple of hours. You should get some rest too, Volf. Sorry that I don’t have a guest room here.”

“The sofa’s more than enough for me.”

“Your feet are going to poke out. You should take my bed; I have an oversized mattress. I’ll get you fresh sheets, and I’ll take the couch.”

“Absolutely not,” Volf said. It was hard to say much to such a firm refusal. “Erm, you’re going to need magic to do your work, so you should prioritize your own well-being! And I worry you’re going to roll off the couch.”

Dahlia paused. “Did you hear that from Marcella?”

“Huh?”

“When I stayed over at Irma’s place one time, I slept on their sofa but rolled off it in the middle of the night. I ached so much, I was stuck like a turtle on its back. Marcella came out to see what the noise was, and, well, I told him to keep it a secret from Irma because it was so embarrassing.”

“No, not at all, I didn’t hear anything from Marcella. Just a coincidence.” Volf’s somewhat frantic denial seemed a little fishy, but Dahlia didn’t think Marcella would have told anyone. Maybe it *was* just a coincidence, after all.

“Okay, fine. I’ll take the bed. Thank you, Volf. I’ll be back with a blanket for you,” she said as headed off.

“Thanks. Sorry for imposing.” Behind Dahlia’s back, the black-haired man had a terribly troubled expression.



After their naps, Dahlia got ready for the day and exited the tower, accompanied by Volf. Ivano had just pulled up in a carriage.

“Whew. Made it.” He was already dressed in his navy three-piece and his hair

was neatly combed. “I just received the professor’s letter saying that you are going to Orlando & Co. Let me just invite myself.”

If anything, Dahlia was glad to have him there too, and so the three hopped aboard the carriage. She explained the situation to Ivano on their way there. “I see. Yes, that should be fine. He’ll agree to help with crafting the tool,” said Ivano.

“But aren’t they busy?”

“If they are, they’re busy with work we’ve assigned them, so we can shift their schedules. Plus, it’s not like Orlando & Co. has any right to refuse your request, chairwoman.”

“Even if we are the ones giving them most of their work, Ivano, that’s not very nice...” Dahlia trailed off at the end, shaken by Ivano’s too-perfect smile.

“I believe I’ve told you that we’re in a business alliance with the Orlandos. They are our subcontractors, so it wouldn’t be impossible to lead them by the nose. Furthermore, I have had Ireneo and Tobias sign a contract at the temple—they can do you no harm.”

“A temple contract? Since when?” Dahlia couldn’t think very clearly, but she had no recollection of this matter. Had he failed to mention it or had she merely forgotten?

“It was a part of our alliance. I felt the need for one in conducting business with the Orlandos, as I don’t fully trust them. I chose not to bring it up, as I figured the topic would be unpleasant for you.” His calm tone was betrayed by the slight self-doubt in his eyes.

“Ivano, am I that, um, undependable?”

“Excuse me?” His eyes grew wide; whether that was due to anger or offense, Dahlia could not tell.

“Dahlia, Ivano was worried for you.”

“I understand that much. I understand that it’s because of my history with them that Ivano doesn’t trust Orlando & Co. I understand I have let Ivano take care of the business side of the company, and I have no intentions of criticizing

how he made the alliance. What I didn't expect was the temple contract..." Frankly, it was a shock. Dahlia didn't understand why he'd felt the need to go that far, but that wasn't her concern. "It's just that—well, remember how you said you want as many of my honest thoughts and opinions as you can get?"

"Yes, of course. I still stand by those words."

There was no hesitancy in Ivano's voice, and so Dahlia spoke freely as well. "Then you should be honest with me too. I know I might not always be able to fully comprehend or come to grips with what you say, but I will never do anything to interfere with the business. So, please, Ivano, be honest with me too and tell me everything you can."

"Ms. Dahlia, I—no, Chairwoman Rossetti, please accept my apologies for treating you like a child." Ivano bowed as deeply as he could while seated across from her.

"Please raise your head, Ivano."

"To be honest about how I feel, I am incensed by the way Tobias—rather, the Orlando family—betrayed Mr. Carlo's wishes. Maybe that is because I have daughters of my own. That, and I harbor a grudge against them."

Volf was just as puzzled as she was. "Something personal?"

"When the family business began to decline, Orlando & Co. were one of the first to cut ties. I mean, it was the former chairman, so it has little to do with Ireneo."

"Ivano..."

"Don't worry, I have no intentions of seeking revenge. I just thought that if I beat Orlando & Co., then I could prove to myself that I have earned power as a businessman, but the reality is that it didn't make me feel anything. We did in fact need a subcontractor, and the terms were great for them too. But I didn't and still don't have a lot of faith in them, hence the temple contract—that I still stand by, even if it may be upsetting for you."

"No, I'm not upset or angry. I trust you, Ivano. If you believe it was warranted, then I stand by you too."

Ivano's eyes grew wide again, and then he wiped the smile off his face. "Chairwoman, I will be as honest as I can, but as a businessman—as a *man*, there may be things I wouldn't want to talk about. If you absolutely must know, then I shall of course tell you everything. But would you please turn a blind eye to my occasional secret and penchant for playing the fiend?"

"Is this about how you're not in danger?" Dahlia asked.

"You're very keen when it comes to this kind of thing, chairwoman," he responded with a smile. "The truth is that Lord Guido has set up security around my wife and daughters."

"That's news to me, Ivano," Volf said.

"It seemed to Lord Guido that it was something obvious and not even worth bringing up. He said if anyone wanted to get at the Rossetti Trading Company, they would target the chairwoman or myself, and then our families. And since we're a family of commoners, we'd never given our personal safety too much thought, and he said it would make sense to have some extra protection. Frankly, I would never have noticed the security detail if he hadn't made it known to me."

"Ivano, I'm sor—"

"Please don't apologize, chairwoman," he said over her. "I—or rather, we can't afford to ignore stuff like that anymore. Our company now has some weight behind it. It's true that we have more to be careful about, but, on the other hand, we have access to all sorts of materials, influence in the guilds, and the support of a marquis. It's good to be able to take advantage of this system; we wouldn't be able to help Marcella and Irma otherwise, eh?"

Dahlia couldn't help but smile too after seeing Ivano's deliberately unscrupulous smirk. "Very well. You don't need to tell me anything you would much rather keep a secret, but tell me your true thoughts if you can. If things get dicey, let me know right away. That's all I ask for."

"I also ask you to let me know if you ever get dragged into anything dangerous. If I'm not around, then ask my brother for help; I'll let him know too," said Volf.

Ivano scratched the back of his head, ruffling his perfectly-combed hair. “Thank you both very much. But, uh, it almost feels like you’re overprotective of me.”

“Not at all. I *am* the chairwoman and your superior, after all.”

“And I ought to be looking after the company as its guarantor.”

Ivano couldn’t contain his smile. Dahlia and Volf, too, had a smile on their faces, but they didn’t seem to realize how similar they were.



“I’m Dahlia Rossetti from the Rossetti Trading Company. Though I don’t have an appointment, I’m hoping to see your magical toolmaker Mr. Tobias Orlando about an urgent request.” All eyes turned to Dahlia as she stood up straight to address Orlando & Co.’s receptionist; half of those eyes then conspicuously flitted towards Volf standing behind her.

She had expected whispers to begin the moment she stepped into the building, but what she hadn’t expected was dead silence, which was all the more nerve-racking. Though Ivano had suggested in the carriage that he would ask for an audience with Tobias in Dahlia’s stead, she’d refused. Helping Irma and Marcella was her idea; it wouldn’t be right to duck behind Ivano.

There was a lengthy beat before the receptionist reacted. “Oh. Um, j-just a moment, please.” The young woman, looking slightly mortified, rushed into the back room but left the door ajar; the guests could hear her ask for Tobias, his response, and then a convolution of voices.

“Good morning. Chairwoman Rossetti.” His expression was stiff and his voice matched it.

Dahlia was grateful that he was here at all. “Good morning, Mr. Orlando. Please forgive me for coming by unannounced.”

“It’s no problem at all. So, may I ask what request you have for me?” Tobias’s polite tone was deeper than usual. He looked like he’d lost weight.

“I ask for your help on a magical tool, to be made right away. I would be happy to offer additional pay for your urgent services.”

“Very well. I accept your request. When and where shall we begin?”

“Immediately.” Without any reservation, she drew within arm’s reach of the surprised Tobias, who then activated the anti-eavesdropping device on his cuff. Dahlia explained in a quiet voice, “We’ll be working at Chairman Zola’s estate. Irma and the child in her belly are in danger, so I *need* this magical tool. Please, I need your help.”

“All right.” After giving his decisive response, Tobias turned around to the door, still standing ajar, which revealed glimpses of a dress of lemon yellow and hair of light amber honey. “I’ll be out for a job, Emilia, so you can head home.”

A cute, petite figure timidly came out from behind the door and stood diagonally behind her husband. “Tobias, I, um...”

But Volf stepped forward and stood between the two women. He commanded the attention of women around him, and today, as he turned his golden eyes on Emilia, was no different. “Would you like to come along, ma’am? You would be joining the rest of us in the lounge connected to the workshop.”

The Orlandos replied almost at the same time. “Oh, um, thank you...”

“Thank you for being thoughtful.”

“Despite it being strictly business, I thought it may alleviate your *unwarranted concerns*.” A detestably fake smile accompanied Volf’s emphasis on the last two words; Ivano pressed a hand to his mouth to hide his wry smile.

Though Dahlia couldn’t see his face from her angle, she understood he’d gone into shady aristocrat mode, which suddenly reminded her—it was the first time that she, he, Tobias, and Emilia had been together since Dahlia and Volf had coincidentally reunited at the restaurant on the main street. Although that memory seemed distant, the event had in fact transpired only four months ago. Dahlia was unfazed about working with her ex-fiancé and felt nothing at all towards his wife; if anything, she thought herself callous in that regard.

“I shall be there as soon as my preparations are finished, Chairwoman Rossetti,” said Tobias.

“Thank you very much for your cooperation. I shall be waiting on site.” After

engaging business mode and exchanging pleasantries, Dahlia turned towards the exit. *This is it. The unicorn and bicorn enchantment—the success of Irma’s magic-leeching bracelet—all hangs on me being in sync with Tobias.* As she clenched her fist and reaffirmed her resolve, a gentle voice called her name.

“Miss Dahlia, shall we?” Volf said, extending his hand towards her.

She didn’t hesitate to lay her hand upon that of the beautifully poised knight; that familiar warmth—as warm as she remembered from that summer day—soothed the soul and spirits.



Despite six people having gathered in the adjoining lounge, there was no conversation to be had after they’d been quickly introduced. Dahlia, Oswald, and Tobias subsequently headed to the workshop, leaving behind Volf, Ermelinda, and Emilia.

“I shall leave the door open today, but I must ask you all to refrain from entering the room or calling out to us,” Oswald said as he led the way inside. As he’d said, he left the door wide open—whether due to the number of people inside, uncertainty about the amount of time needed, or whatever else.

“Good luck, Dahlia,” Volf said. She responded to his hushed words of encouragement with a smile before stepping into the workshop.

Tobias, a few steps behind her, waved once before doing so the same; Emilia watched silently as he walked away.

Once the toolmakers made their way to the workbench, Dahlia explained Marcella and Irma’s situation to the newcomer, then Oswald explained the process of crafting the magic-leeching bracelet.

As Oswald answered questions, Dahlia looked over the materials to be used very soon. The sealsilver-painted plate on the workbench contained two processed pieces of unicorn and two of bicorn horn—he must’ve done them up while she was back in the tower.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, before we expend the rare materials, I would like to first test your magic.”

“Very well, Mr. Orlando.” She hadn’t worked with Tobias since her magic

went up, and so the two of them decided to practice by making some waterproof cloth. The piece of cloth measured about only sixty centimeters by one meter—small by the product’s standards, but it was merely for practice. Oswald sat two seats away from them and watched carefully.

“Let us begin.” Dahlia coursed her magic first. Her semi-transparent polychromatic beam crossed with Tobias’s blue-tinged multicolored beam and began to spread the blue slime solution evenly across the medium. However, when the thin blue film covered half of the cloth, something abnormal occurred: Dahlia’s magic rippled and then curled like ribbon. Tobias’s was unchanged, fine and flat, but it seemed as though it were drawn towards the twisted beam. In the end, the coating was far from uniform and gaps dotted the surface; never ever had Dahlia done such a poor job before. The pair looked somewhat discouraged.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, is your magic perhaps a little unstable?” asked Tobias.

“That’s right. I have yet to become accustomed to the recent increase...” she responded in a business-like manner. While he disposed of the first test, Dahlia restarted the experiment, spreading the cloth across the workbench and carefully stretching out the wrinkles with her fingertips. “Here, Tobias.”

She had inadvertently called him by his first name as she handed him the powdered blue slime, and he responded just as casually. “Thanks.”

Dahlia felt an icy pang pricking her back, but she chalked it up to her imagination and cleared the chill in her throat. Tobias had obviously realized the gaffe too, as he froze up in front of her. But the sudden formality after working together closely for so many years was distracting. “Maybe while we work, we should speak like we used to normally. You can call me by my name and I’ll do the same to you.”

“Yeah, I think that’d help. We’ll go back once we finish the job?”

“That sounds great.” There was a time for propriety, but this was not it; they needed to be able to work together and make those enchantments on the unicorn and bicorn horns.

Right from the beginning of the second attempt, Dahlia’s beam was fluttering slightly, likely because she was now overzealous. She compensated by putting

more force into her right hand.

“You’re pitching. You should straighten up,” he said.

“Huh?” Shocking were his calm tone and brown eyes staring her way.

“You’re pitching more than usual and tensing up your right hand, and I think that’s making it hard for you.” He was right—she hadn’t realized she was leaning forward until he pointed it out, and she rolled her shoulders back. “And try tucking your elbow in. You’re stretching out your arm too far and your fatigue is causing you to tremble.”

“Maybe I’m out of shape...”

“What happened to thirty reps of push-ups and sit-ups a day?”

Dahlia couldn’t help but smile; his talk brought back memories. “Physical fitness is important to magical toolmaking too, so remember your thirty reps of push-ups and sit-ups every day,” Carlo used to say, but she had never seen him exercise at all. “Father was always a ‘do as I say, not as I do’ person, eh?”

“No, I think master said he sweated a lot, so he’d do it in the washroom before his bath.”

That came as quite the surprise, but Dahlia tried her best to not let it get to her. She tucked her elbow in, just as Tobias said to. Still, her beam shot at an angle, so he shifted the cloth to correct it. He also used his own magic to instantly patch up any holes that Dahlia couldn’t see from her angle. This time, the end result lacked any unevenness and seemed to be perfect.

Looking at the glossy waterproof cloth, Dahlia was amazed. When they had worked together in the past, Tobias would check on her enchantment and shift the cloth around as needed; his quality control had helped them meet deadlines and minimize rejects.

Since this spring, she had been working solo. That presented its own challenges, she had thought—it required more time than before, and more imperfections cropped up—and so she’d ended up needing to scrutinize her work more closely. It was only now that Dahlia understood that it was Tobias who’d silently assisted her, checked her mistakes, and completed any additional tasks. It was a shame that the position was vacant.

“Take a break if you’re tired.”

“I’m fine.” Her words came out more brusque than she would’ve liked. Dahlia replaced the completed waterproof cloth with the sealsilver-painted plate, atop which she carefully set the refined horn pieces one by one. Strong magic crept out of her, and she tensed up her hand reflexively. “Let’s give it a shot.”

Tobias nodded, and from across the workbench, magic began flowing out of his right hand. Though hers was still a curled ribbon, it finally became a steady stream; his was even and straight, like a fine ribbon. Seeing that blue-tinged beam again was awfully nostalgic.

After some more time, Tobias voiced his disappointment. “It took our magic, but it didn’t work...” The white unicorn horn was now spotted with a pallid purple and the bicorn horn had turned a dark gray. Their magic mixed together, but it seemed as though it wasn’t enough.

“Let’s try again, Tobias.” But plowing ahead did little to help, and their second try proved unsuccessful too, though the horn formed stripes instead of spots this time around. She was able to enchant with Tobias, so it wasn’t a compatibility issue; if Dahlia had to guess, it was because her magic wasn’t stable enough. Now that her magic was powerful, it was harder to keep steady than in the past. Dahlia bit her lip in frustration when she saw the dark purple stripes on the otherwise white horn. Oswald hadn’t uttered a single word and instead observed their work; Dahlia was actually hoping he would have some advice for them, but perhaps that was her anxiety rearing its head. She knew what to do; she just didn’t know how to do it. She might need more practice, but time was in short supply.

Dahlia saw Tobias staring at the black and white horns, and it was then that Carlo’s words came to mind: “Dahlia is Dahlia, Tobias is Tobias. Each of you have your own particular strengths, so use your skills to complement each other and help each other grow.” If they needed advice from each other, now was the time and place to ask, as hard as it may have been. “Um, have you noticed something? Maybe there’s something I should change?”

“Hmm...” As he was apt to do, Tobias stroked his chin with his right hand, contemplating. Before long, he turned his tea-brown eyes on her. “It might be a

difference in magic and permeation rate. Do you think you can ease your output by a grade or two, Dahlia? Because I can't give any more than I am already."

"But if I do that, it'll get really wavy."

"That's fine. I'll adapt to you; just focus on controlling your output. And I don't think you can see too well from the other side, so come over to this side."

"Okay." Dahlia stood close to him, as they were both used to. Each of them extended a hand on the same side, in the same grip, at the same height, and—without even counting down—streamed their magic into the new pieces of horn at the same time. Dahlia concentrated on suppressing her strength and keeping it steady. Her ribbon mixed with his to become flat, yet it still slithered from side to side.

Just as she began to lose hope, Tobias muttered, "I'll adapt to you."

It was enough to assuage her fears; ironically, she still had faith in his magical toolmaking skills. But that was what she needed. It was on Tobias, the senior apprentice, to control the flow of their magic. All Dahlia had to do was focus on herself.

His magic wrapped around hers, spiraling into a darker shade before flashing a cool white—their mixed magic had begun to enter the two horn pieces. Tobias managed to work with her slightly fluctuating beam and made the spiral as if it had been that shape all along, suffusing the horns and dazzling the room in a beautiful rainbow. But the toolmakers didn't have the luxury of taking in the sights; they needed to bring all their mental faculties to bear on the task of taming and fusing their magic. They focused so hard, they didn't know if they could stop their magic once the horns were finished.

"Just about...?"

"Should be..." Her legs were about to give out, and she propped herself up against the workbench for support. Then, the two pieces of horn transformed into something like a blue crystal filled with light, twinkling at every ray of light.

Oswald switched his glasses for a blue-lensed loupe and approached the product. "May I?" His silvery almond eyes looked stern as he examined the

enchancements, rotating them once, then again. “Well done. Both horn pieces have absorbed your magic.”

Hearing the good news, Dahlia and Tobias crashed backwards into their seats in relief.

As the other two had been rendered immobile, Oswald took it upon himself to embed the two pieces of horn into the bracelet and fix them with powdered unicorn horn. He checked his work to ensure it was done properly, then placed a basilisk’s golden talon on the palm of his hand.

Dahlia had initially thought that the cockatrices and basilisks found in this world would be similar to the beasts from the tales of fantasy in her previous life. While she was right about the former, the latter had defied her expectations. The basilisk in this world was a monster with the torso of a great black serpent, clad in tough scales, with four massive piercing talons, each venomous enough to drop a human being in seconds. Its most striking feature was the shiny golden crown of a cockscomb on its head. Though coming across a basilisk was difficult, Dahlia had learned in school to immediately run the other direction if she were to ever sight one.

“Next, we shall enchant with the basilisk talon.” Oswald had a crimson ring on the middle finger of his right hand. It was presumably to protect him against the toxins, but Dahlia had never seen a ring of that color. Upon closer inspection, the crimson flickered and circulated like a trapped flame.

“Professor, is that ring to protect against toxins?”

“The bracelet I usually wear should already suffice for that. No, the ring is to increase my magic, as I do not have enough for this specific task. Note that it is crucial that I am not distracted during the process, so under no circumstances are you to speak to me.” After receiving their acknowledgment, Oswald made a grave face. “Consider this a special lesson. Watch carefully.”

He covered the basilisk talon atop the palm of his right hand with a layer of magic, as though wrapping it in a piece of white cloth. The golden talon began to crackle, and after a while, it disappeared and turned Oswald’s white beam to gold as well. That was likely magical dissolution—using the pressure of his

magic to dissolve the talon. If done improperly, Oswald's own magic could have rent his flesh to shreds, so Dahlia had heard; it was the first time she had seen it done.

Oswald transferred the golden magic to his extended right index finger. Then, the magic stretched as thin as a strand of hair and onto the bluish mythrill band in his left hand. As he wrapped it around the bracelet, the single thread became two, then another revolution turned it into four, then eight, and so on. Every thread wound around the bracelet was equally fine. Dahlia and Tobias watched with bated breath; they had never seen such precise enchanting before.

"Huh...?"

A small red drip fell from Oswald's hand and onto the floor—a cut on his finger? His palm? More than half of the golden magic remained. Dahlia knew why she was not to disturb Oswald, but she couldn't help worrying about him. There were already too many strands to count, and it looked like the bracelet had been tied with ribbon. But there were no distinct layers to it, no thickness to speak of, no matter how many times the magic wound around the bracelet. The golden ribbon glowed, and the more times it went around, the richer the color was. But blood continued to flow from the hand that was casting the magic, exuding a smell of rusting iron; Oswald's wound must be getting bigger and deeper. In spite of that, his face was straight, as if nothing of note were happening, though the wave of sweat crashing down his neck from his forehead betrayed him.

Dahlia held herself back from stopping him and hoped it would soon be over. She found her hands clasped, ready for prayer.

Once all of the magic had been transferred over, Oswald lifted the bracelet in both hands. Just as his audience thought the process was complete, he clad the bracelet in a red, semi-transparent magic, as though a heatless fire were engulfing it. "Flame fixing," he commanded, and the magic responded by glowing a deep crimson. It pulled itself taut and fired the bracelet like pottery, imprinting a golden coil pattern on its surface. After one final examination, the magic-leeching bracelet was complete, then Oswald gently placed it onto the sealsilver-lacquered plate. A steady stream of blood dribbled from the fingers of

his right hand.

“Quick, professor, take this potion!”

“No need to fret. It is but a scratch.” Oswald poured one half of the bottle onto his open wound and drank the other. He pressed a towel to his right hand, dabbing the blood away. “Why don’t you give it a try?”

Dahlia held an earth crystal in one hand and the bracelet in the other. She channeled her magic through her right hand, only for it to disappear within the band; the silvery sköll fang on the inside glowed. “D-Did it work?”

“Congratulations.”

“Oh, thank goodness!”

The fatigue showed on their faces, except for Oswald’s; maintaining a cool expression, he said, “It should take about thirty minutes for it to fully set. In the meantime, let us review today’s lesson. Have you noticed anything about the magic from my right hand, Dahlia?”

“Huh? Uh, um, it’s round, I guess?” She scrambled to come up with an answer, but in all this excitement, she hadn’t the leeway to learn much about herself.

“You ought to brush up on your perception and composure,” Oswald said. “How about you, Mr. Orlando? Can you answer the question?”

“Erm, I believe that magic flowed out of your right hand in a fast clockwise spiral.” It seemed that Tobias was ever watchful, even under all that stress. *Bastard.*

“Correct. To prevent the magic in the basilisk talon from solidifying and diffusing, you must make your magic spin quickly. You may do so on the top of your palm, but my magic was insufficient, and I suffered because of that.” His eye darted to the bloodied towel.

“Even you lack the necessary magic, Chairman Zola?” Tobias asked.

“It is not the capacity—you and I are not so different in that regard—it is how magic is used. Magical tools can make up for a lack of magic, like—” His ring, drained of its color and reduced to black rust, split in two and fell to the floor.

“Ah, it has run out.”

“Professor, your ring...”

“No need to worry. It is a consumable, and I shall stock up again sometime soon.” Despite Oswald’s nonchalant tone, Dahlia still felt sorry for making him use up something that must be very valuable. She made a note to consult with Volf and Ivano to bring Oswald something in return, something other than scorio. He explained, “As it forms a strong bond with earth magic, I used fire magic for fixing. Think of it like firing porcelain.”

After having witnessed that exemplary display of delicate enchantment, Dahlia felt questions welling up from within her. “Professor, will the magic in the basilisk conflict with the bracelet?”

“There is a way to avoid that magical antagonism with methods like flame fixing. However, the intricacies of magical compatibility are something a mage would know best, and I recommend that you seek tutelage from one, as I am unfortunately lacking in that department.”

“Not even you, Chairman Zola...?” Tobias mumbled to himself—a sentiment Dahlia shared. She and Oswald were about thirty years apart in age, and there was a corresponding gap in their skill as magical toolmakers, yet it seemed there were others still more knowledgeable than him.

“Want to learn the secret to becoming a proficient toolmaker?” the professor asked, earning enthusiastic nods in return. “Keep living and keep learning.”

Dahlia would have loved to groan, but she respectfully shared a forced smile with Tobias.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” She stood up to retrieve a box that was sitting by the wall and placed it on the workbench. From inside, she retrieved the spellbook. Tobias’s eyes went wide; he looked to have some recollection of it. “This was left among father’s books. I think it’s yours...”

“No, master said that he made it for both of us. Though the last time I saw it, it hadn’t been locked, and none of the pages were filled...” he said. Dahlia felt somewhat relieved; it seemed that, surprisingly, Carlo had had the good sense to leave something for her. Tobias continued, “It’s bound to my blood. I’ll open

it and slot in a sealsilver plate so it won't lock on you. Maybe we can even have a mage disenchant it. And, um, with all the trouble I've caused you, you should keep it."

"But don't you need your own spellbook?"

"I don't have the right to take it. Chairman Zola, may I borrow a sealsilver-painted plate from you?"

"Of course." Oswald grabbed a single plate from his shelf and handed it to Tobias. "Dahlia, Mr. Orlando, would you like some time to yourselves? I'm sure that besides the spellbook, you two have much to talk about. I dare say that if you let this chance slip away, you may have a hard time finding another one in the future."

"I mean..."

"Um, I'm just handing this to him..."

Oswald looked at the stammering toolmakers with terribly kind eyes. "There is so much I left unsaid to those who have departed from my life. I wouldn't want you two to make the same mistake and harbor the same regrets. So, be honest and speak from the heart. I shall spend twenty minutes going over some documents." Without so much as receiving a reply, he left an anti-eavesdropper on the workbench and walked away to the back of the room.

Dahlia and Tobias turned to each other in discomfiture. He was the first to pipe up. "Why don't we go over it together? There's a good chance it's still empty."

"Good idea."

Tobias flipped open the front cover and two loose pages came fluttering out. He took them into his hands, and his eyes flickered left to right a handful of times. Suddenly, those eyes became red, and he bit his lip until it turned white.

"A letter from father?"

"Yeah."

"Can I read it too?"

"Well, it's addressed to me and, uh, I don't think you would want to read it."

“I’m okay reading it if you’re okay with sharing. It’s the last message from my father, so please...” Her pleading failed to fully convince him, but in the end, he gave in.

By the leftward slant of the text, it was obvious at first glance that it was her father’s writing on the sheet of white paper. It read:

Tobias,

If you are reading this, then something has probably happened to me. I’ve been feeling my age recently, and no one can escape time. This spellbook contains only the bare minimum; if you need help with anything that’s not covered in here, ask Professor Lina Lauren. And go pay respect to Oswald, chairman of the Zola Company, and bring him some scorpio. They’re both very capable toolmakers. Between the two of them, they’ll figure something out if you’re ever in trouble.

Take care of Dahlia for me. Trite, I know. Stand before her and be her shield. Talk to Ireneo and see if you two can’t help her avoid catching too much attention. You know how much I tend to worry, so thank you.

Make sure you stay healthy too. Don’t work too hard. I know how you burn the midnight oil in secret, but everything in moderation. You’ll become a fine toolmaker, so there’s no need to rush yourself.

I doubt you’ll ever read this, but let me end this letter well: To my son and daughter, live well and be happy. (That was pretty cool, right?)

Carlo Rossetti

PS: I leave all of my picture books to my son. Hide whichever you like for yourself when you clean them out.

“Father...” Carlo’s hand triggered a flood of memories, and Dahlia caught a lump in her throat as her chest ached. But that last line absolutely ruined everything. *Why did I even get all emotional? You should’ve just ended the damn letter where you said you would! What was even the point of that postscript?!* If her father were still around, Dahlia would have grabbed him by the shoulders and shaken the dickens out of him. There was nothing she could

do now, but she swore to herself she'd give him an earful the next time she visited his grave. "And here I was getting emotional, only for my feelings to be trampled upon at the end. There was something highly wrong with that man."

"Master...made preparations for us...but why the picture books?" Tobias voiced his confusion while choking back tears; he must not have known about Carlo's collection.

"Father hid the spellbook behind a mountain of those books. I found it difficult to bring myself to clean out his room, so everything just sat for a year."

"But why?"

"I think he was trying to tell you to clean them out for him." She had put Volf through the trouble instead, though. But then, she realized that they should've been kept for Tobias. "Um, I actually gathered all the picture books into the closet, but I haven't thrown them out yet."

"I'm not interested, to be honest."

"But there are two whole burlap sacks full of them..."

"I really don't want them, thank you. And *two* burlap sacks?" he asked incredulously. "I mean, if they're in full color, you might be able to get some coin for them at a used bookstore."

"Oh, really?"

"Maybe?"

With tears still welling in their eyes, Dahlia and Tobias were lost for a way to tie up this weird conversation. The silence was broken when they each let out a heavy sigh at nearly the same moment.

"I think I finally understand why you wanted me to be so plain. Father told you to be my shield or something along those lines after we got engaged, didn't he?" It was very much what an overprotective father like him would say.

"He said that there was a lot about personal relationships and business he had yet to teach you, so he asked me to be in front of you." Tobias didn't deny it, but it was obvious to her that he was conflicted about whether to tell her the truth. After having spent so much time by his side, Dahlia could read him well

enough. That was all in the past, however. “I know it’s too late for me to say this, but I truly am sorry about everything. I’m to blame for it all.”

“Don’t just wrap everything up by yourself like that. Tell me honestly—what was it about me that wasn’t good enough for you?” That question had plagued her for the longest time. Which part of her was unfitting to be his wife? Her looks? Personality? Behavior?

“It wasn’t you; it was me. You’re a better magical toolmaker than me, so envy got the better of me.”

“What was there to be envious of? You’re more skilled than I am.”

“My eye was good and I could fix mistakes, but you had imagination, creativity, and the courage to experiment. I felt inferior because of that. And so I wanted to see if I could get you to do as I pleased once we got married. Trust me, I know now just how terrible I am,” he said, like it was a confession and she was the priest. He heaved a sigh. “How about you, Dahlia? You probably have stuff you want to say to me.”

Now was the time to do as Oswald had said and speak from the heart. “Let’s see. You know, when you brought your new girlfriend to your new home the day before we were to be wedded, when you said you wanted to live there with her, when you told me to give you back the engagement bracelet, when you gave the rubies back to me—it was all quite the shock.”

“I’m sorry. All I had in my head was Emilia. And I actually ordered some crimson gold from a regular so I could make a jewelry stand to go with those rubies, but, well, it went over budget...”

“Crimson gold? That stuff is even more expensive than mythril.” Crimson gold was a base material perfect for powerful enchantments. However, it could only be found in volcanic belts, making it extremely rare, and its price reflected that. And if Tobias had placed an order through a regular customer, it would have been very hard to say no afterwards. Maybe that was why he’d been short on cash and had needed the engagement bracelet back. Still, crimson gold was a very precious metal. A difficult material to work with, but it was an interesting one for sure. Dahlia wondered if it could be fashioned into a magical sword; if not, she could make a jewelry stand, bracelet, or ring out of it too. “Do you still

have it?”

“Still in the same box that it came in. I have no plans for it currently, but getting rid of it doesn’t feel quite right either.” It wasn’t likely he could sell it for as much as he had spent on it. Dahlia asked him how big it was and how much he had bought it for, and his answer made sense: it had cost him over twenty-five gold; parting with something that expensive must have been hard.

“Will you sell it to me at cost? I might use it as material.”

“I wouldn’t mind selling it to you, but don’t buy it if it’s purely for my sake.”

“I simply want to use it as material. If you’re so worried about it, you should’ve used it on your wife. Imagine reusing an engagement bracelet!” Dahlia couldn’t keep the thought bottled up any longer. Sure, it was disrespectful to ask for it back, but to reuse it on Emilia? Unbelievable.

“I mean, Emilia said she doesn’t mind...”

“And you believed that?! There’s no way *I’d* be happy, that’s for sure. Look, if you sell it at a jeweler’s and use the money from the crimson gold as well, you can probably buy a new one.”

“A-All right, I’ll see what she thinks...” Tobias could but sheepishly agree, what with the immense pressure he was facing from his ex-fiancée.

While the opportunity was still there, Dahlia went with the flow and continued her questioning. “Hey, um, since when did you two get together?”

“The day before.”

“What, the day before you called off our engagement?”

“Yeah. She said wanted to see the new house, then when we got there, she said she had feelings for me,” he admitted, as though they were the eponymous characters of *Romeo and Juliet*. As Dahlia grimaced at the fact that she didn’t have any luck with love and romance in this life or her last one, Tobias turned the question back onto her. “How about you and, uh, Sir Scalfarotto?”

“The first time we met was around two days after. We only bumped into each other for the second time at the restaurant, and he only acted like that out of kindness.” She folded the letter in half along the existing crease and returned it

to Tobias. There was one other thing she wanted to find out, though. “Was selling the waterproof cloth through Orlando & Co. because of my father’s wishes as well?”

“That’s what I heard afterwards.”

“Even the matter with the compact magical stove, right? Or maybe the whole of Orlando & Co. conspired to protect me?” It had never made sense to her that the senior apprentice Tobias would put her own creation under his name. There sure was a lot that could have been attributed to “stand before her and be her shield.” “You should have said so from the beginning; we could’ve figured something out together or talked to the guild about it, and maybe things could’ve turned out better for your company...”

“How could I have ever brought it up to you? I broke my promise to my master to protect his daughter, I had eyes only for Emilia, and I legitimately forgot about the name thing too. It wasn’t as if we talked about this stuff before. I did everything on my own accord, so I ought to shoulder the responsibility as well.”

“But like you said, that was your idea. What about your company? That must’ve brought them trouble.” Dahlia had heard from Ivano earlier in the day about the decline of Orlando & Co. It wasn’t any of her business, yet she still felt sorry for them for some reason.

Tobias hesitated for a moment before he spoke. “That’s why we were there at the company today. Emilia and I visited to apologize to the chairman, the people in charge, and our guarantors, and then you came along.”

“I see...”

“It turns out the family business has the Rossetti Trading Company to thank for keeping us afloat. I’ll do whatever I can do to pay for my mistakes,” he said before growing meek. “Do you have anything else you’d like to say to me? You could even sock me right in the face right now.”

The smile on her face was more dejected than happy. “Both father and you have been so terrible to me. Father just up and left me, even though he kept going on about protecting me. You left me for another woman. You two are so selfish, you know?”

“Sorry...”

“But even without the two of you, even without protection from either of you, I’ve made it okay, haven’t I? I’ve got friends and work.”

“I’d say you’re doing better without me.”

She looked away from him and at the floor. If she had to guess, they likely had very similar self-deprecating looks on their faces right now. “You know, I was going to listen to your every word and stand behind you as your wife. I thought if I were useful, you wouldn’t cast me away.”

“Cast you away...?”

“I didn’t want to be abandoned, even if there wasn’t romantic love between us. I would’ve been fine as long as we were beside each other, as long as I didn’t have to die alone. In hindsight, though, that probably wasn’t the right way to think.” Now that she considered it, Tobias had cared about what she thought or what she wanted to do, yet she had always chosen to simply smile and go along with his decision. “That was probably revolting how I would just hang my head and let you decide everything, as if I were a puppet without a mind of my own.”

“What are you talking about? You helped me so much, so thank you, even if it’s late.”

“I should thank you too for secretly protecting me from harm.” Dahlia had heard from Lucia about how Tobias worried for her. Having worked alone and founded her own company, she had since realized that he’d secretly dealt with clients’ complaints too. And then there was the letter from her father, which made her realize Tobias had protected her not out of jealousy but out of familial love—it was almost laughable how naive and clueless she had been. Tobias and her father may have done things the wrong way, but they’d had the best of intentions and done the best they could. She continued, “The truth is that I didn’t want to be behind you but to be beside you. I was too afraid to say it, though.”

“You’d hardly be beside me.”

“Huh?”

He flicked his eyes over to the lounge for a brief moment, but when they

returned to her face, he had nothing else to say.

“I think everything would’ve worked out better if we were merely fellow apprentices. Father must’ve misread us.”

“Maybe. Still, I did what I did to—”

“That’s enough, Tobias. I forgive you for everything. Please don’t apologize again.”

The senior apprentice froze up for a moment before hanging his head. “Thank you, Dahlia. I’d be glad to help you in the future to the extent of my capabilities, so call upon me if there’s anything I can do.”

“I’ll do that. Please tell Ireneo that I’ll explain to Ivano and Gabriella about father’s intentions.” The conversation came to a halt. Dahlia looked over at the table next to them, where their successful attempt at making waterproof cloth was lying. “Even with more magic, I still can’t best you at making the surface smooth and flat.”

“I didn’t think you’d be the envious type.”

“I just didn’t say it out loud. I wished I could do it as well as you did. When you make waterproof cloth, your blue magic turns rainbow like the skies after a good rain—I loved that.”

“And I envied your bottomless magic—and your imagination.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that.”

“Too stubborn or embarrassed to have said anything. Speaking of which, your magic has become even stronger. Sure, it was a little unstable at first, but once you got it, your beam was even denser and more vivid than before.”

“I’m happy to hear that. I can’t really tell if it’s changed much, since I see my own magic all the time.”

This casual conversation, like the ones they had always had in the past, brought her back to the moment, into the reality that all of this was over. Any sort of bitterness she might have held had already disappeared without a trace. They were nothing more, nothing less than two magical toolmakers who had studied under the same master.

Oswald cleared his throat, likely an attempt to signal that their time was almost up. Dahlia and Tobias exchanged the slightest nod of acknowledgment. “I think you should take the spellbook, Tobias. It’s bonded to you, after all.”

“All right. Thank you. I’ll have a scribe copy it for you.”



“I would appreciate that. I’m sure there’s a lot in there that I’ve learned and forgotten already,” she said, though she was drawing a blank as for how to cap the conversation. A random thought did come to her mind, though. “This might sound a little weird, but in spite of how we were always working together, I don’t think we have ever said goodbye to each other. I don’t think we even bade each other farewell when we ended our engagement.”

“I hadn’t really thought about that...”

When “see you tomorrow” or “see you after the weekend” or “see you after the holidays” had sufficed, there had never been a need to say “goodbye” at the Green Tower. “Well, you’re the senior apprentice,” prompted Dahlia.

“What? No, you first.”

Though they had been engaged, there had never been romantic love between them. They were merely coworkers and sibling apprentices of the same master and had spent a lot of time with each other. Then why was there a pang in her chest?

“Goodbye, Tobias.”

“Goodbye, Dahlia.”

Such simple parting words, yet the two found something to smile at.



Through the open door, the three toolmakers in the workshop were visible. Their voices sometimes would get past the void created by the anti-eavesdropping device too, but it continued to shroud the context around their words. Dahlia—standing on the far side of the workbench—and Tobias—who had his back towards the lounge—began enchanting.

Volf had chosen a seat on the sofa that provided him with a vantage of the next room, and he kept an eye on them. He found himself holding his breath as he watched them work, but it didn’t seem as though things were going well; they even failed at making waterproof cloth. Just when Volf thought they’d grown too far apart to be able to work together, he saw Dahlia mouthing the name “Tobias,” and the man responded to her oh so naturally. Volf immediately looked away and took a few deep breaths; his feathers had gotten so ruffled

that his intimidation had come out on its own initiative. The two of them had a longtime working relationship, and either the familiarity had come out of the blue or it was normal for toolmakers to interact like that—so the knight persuaded himself. While his thoughts bounced around in his head, it looked like the second attempt at making waterproof cloth was successful.

The toolmakers then moved on to the unicorn and bicorn horns. Seeing them conversing, navigating through the enchantment process by trial and error made Volf feel so distant from them, despite being only as far as the next room. As they progressed, Volf had to admit, to his chagrin, the kaleidoscope of colors thrown by their magic was beautiful. When he realized he had placed his finger on his lip, Ermelinda stepped out of the room to make another pot of black tea; he hadn't had any of it, yet a bitterness engulfed his mouth. He noticed the woman with honey hair looking into the workshop the same way he was; earlier, her face had shown a mixture of shock and anxiety, but it had since become pale.

“Is it painful to watch for you too, Sir Scalfarotto?” Though her words seeking empathy came suddenly, it was hardly surprising to Volf—he had noticed her looking his way earlier.

Volf shook his head, his sight still fixed on the room opposite. Closeness did not a couple make; they were two magical toolmakers working together. The reason his hand was clenched in a fist was simply because his good friend had been hurt by the man standing next to her, and Volf worried she would be hurt again.

After some time, Emilia peeled herself away from the door and moved so that the workshop was out of her line of sight. Though Volf had only looked her way innocently and didn't mean to observe her, he saw her sit on one end of the sofa with her hands clasped tightly. Her trembling shoulders made Volf concerned for her well-being. Despite that, he kept the same distance from her. “Do you feel unwell, ma'am?”

“I got in between the two of them, didn't I...” Her words tumbled out of her mouth and her eyes were blank.

“Mrs. Orlando?” Volf wasn't sure how to respond—if at all—to the seemingly

rhetoical question; he figured calling her by her family name would do. The way she referred to Tobias and Dahlia as “the two of them” as if they were a pair did not sit right with him, though.

“They’re so in sync and work so well together, so capable of making great magical tools, yet I...” Teardrops fell into her clasped hands as she went silent; she cried silently with her face down.

Volf couldn’t deal with it; consoling people—especially women—was far from his bailiwick. Besides, wasn’t Emilia one of the people who had hurt Dahlia? What reason did he have to comfort her? Not only that, but if he picked his words wrong, he might find himself the victim—such was the curse of his good looks.

It was then Ermelinda returned to the lounge with a maid. “Sir Scalfarotto?”

“I, uh, I didn’t...” Volf sounded as though he were searching for an excuse after having gotten caught making a girl cry.

Thankfully, Ermelinda didn’t suspect him of any wrongdoing. She silently nodded, put down the tea in front of Volf, and then dismissed the maid. “Their work should take some more time, so please help yourself to more tea.”

“Thank you very much,” he said, as he raised his cup of tea.

The host approached Emilia and asked in almost a whisper, “Are you okay, Mrs. Orlando?”

“Yes, I’m...I’m fine... Sorry...” Try as she might, Emilia could not stop the tears from flowing. She pressed a handkerchief against her mouth in an attempt to stifle the sobbing. Ermelinda sat down beside her and ran her hand down Emilia’s back.

Volf felt little compassion for her; he wondered if that would be considered heartless. He sipped his tea, but its flavor remained unknown to him—what was on his mind was whether Dahlia was thirsty or tired.

“You must be worried,” Ermelinda said, surmising, “afraid that your husband might be swayed by Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“H-How did you...” Emilia froze; Ermelinda’s guess must’ve been right on the

mark.

Volf pretended to mind his own business, bringing the cup of tea to his lips again.

“Being the wife of a chairman, I have been around. I, too, worry about my husband when he is working—and about how charming he is. But in your case, your husband is currently with his ex-fiancée, someone who he used to spend a great deal of time with, so of course you would be anxious.”

Emilia couldn't find a response. “I...”

“But you had your husband call off their engagement, and now you are in the spot you coveted. What do you have to worry or suspect?”

“But I got in between them—”

“Right. But you have him by your side, don't you?”

“And if he wavers? Ms. Dahlia is infinitely more capable than I am, and they're so in sync and capable of making great magical tools. I try my best with chores and helping Tobias out with work, but I make a mess of everything. I keep causing trouble for everyone and the only thing I can do is say sorry...” Emilia poured her heart out, yet she was met with even more bluntness.

“Then can you give up on him? Are you able to tell him with a smile to find happiness elsewhere?”

That was when Volf couldn't keep quiet any longer. “Mrs. Zola!” What was she saying?! Whatever Dahlia and Tobias had had was long over. There was no way they would get back together.

“I won't. I can't. I love Tobias...”

“You love him so much that you had to have him for yourself, even though he already had someone else.”

“I know it was wrong of me, I know I shouldn't have done it, but I needed him...” The pain screamed out of her whispered response.

If Emilia were a wilier woman, he could've blamed her for being so selfish. If Emilia were a more calculating woman, he could've laughed at how she'd gotten hoisted by her own petard. But she was neither of those things; she had

simply been juvenile, desperate, and devious, and Volf had nothing to say about that.

“I loathe how much I can relate. I was in your shoes once,” Ermelinda confessed. Both Volf and Emilia looked at her in surprise.

“You were, Mrs. Zola...?”

“I wanted nothing more than my husband, and so I changed everything I could to suit him—work, clothes, hairstyle, speech, mannerisms, and anything else I could think of. I cut off contact with my family and friends too, but I haven’t looked back since. I can no longer care about appearances when I have earned the love of a man who already had two lovely wives.” Oswald’s third wife rested her hand on Emilia’s shoulder, and, with her eyes of verdure, stared into those soft brown eyes. “Despite our cowardice, the pain we’ve caused, and the talking behind our backs, we have won already, haven’t we?”

The raven-haired beauty’s cheerful countenance first struck Volf, quickly followed by immense fear.

Ermelinda continued, “You will have to bear the burden of your actions, now and forever. But you were ready for that, were you not?”

“I thought I was ready.”

“Then all you need to do is be by his side. Because you are his wife, you must be another set of eyes and stand strong beside him.”

“If only I could...”

But Volf cut her expression of self pity short. “I heard that when he ended his engagement with Miss Dahlia, Mr. Orlando said that he had found true love.”

“True love...?” Emilia’s eyes grew wide from the pleasant surprise, and Volf could but pull a smile in response.

“If you haven’t already been doing so, live your lives together in the true love you share. I think you two make for a great couple,” Ermelinda added. If both Tobias and Emilia believed there was true love between them, then one would have expected them to enjoy it. Or rather, they ought to. That way, Tobias would never hurt Dahlia again, and he could disappear from her memory. It was

hardly an honorable thought, but right now, it was all Volf wished for.

Emilia cast her head down in silence. Afterwards, Ermelinda urged Emilia to fix her makeup and led her out of the room.

Volf moved to a different couch, closer to the workshop. Oswald, for whatever reason, moved to the back of the room as Dahlia brought out the spellbook and began chatting with Tobias. It seemed like handing it to him was going well enough. However, a loose page that had been sandwiched within the book put Dahlia in a grave mood, then brought her nearly to tears, and finally a grimacing smile. Seeing her mood swing wildly as she chatted with Tobias bothered Volf even more.

Despite understanding that it was extremely disrespectful and trying to convince himself not to do so, Volf found himself watching her speak. As they chatted, Dahlia bloomed into a smile that stole his attention, and her pink lips moved in a way that professed her love. “I loved that”—those three words drove a blade into Volf’s chest.

Even though Tobias was just a man who her father had set her up with, it seemed like Dahlia had had feelings for him. Perhaps she *still* had lingering feelings for him, in spite of his treachery, infidelity, and outrageous destruction of their engagement. It wasn’t as though Volf had any right to say anything, so he chose to pretend as though he’d seen and learned nothing. He folded his arms up tight and felt as though he could turn any monster into smithereens right about now.



While Dahlia and Volf took a coach back to the temple with the magic-leeching bracelet in hand, Tobias stayed behind to help Oswald with the cleanup. The bracelet was a success; Irma and her child should end up safe and sound, and Marcella would no doubt find some peace of mind.

Just as Tobias closed the last magically sealed box, the world spun violently for a moment; the adrenaline must’ve worn off, and a frightful bout of nausea and the chills hit him all at once. He rushed to the washroom, but his empty stomach wasn’t conducive to vomiting and he didn’t feel much better

afterwards. Tobias knew his magic reserves had run dry. His head was pounding and the queasiness wouldn't leave. It took him a few tries before his pale, frozen fingers could turn the doorknob. Rather than imposing on Oswald by passing out in his manor, Tobias headed back to the workshop to excuse himself. However, Oswald was waiting there with a pair of glasses etched with scorpions and filled to the brim, presumably with the contents of the wide-mouthed liquor bottle containing a red scorpion; Tobias had had the strong drink before with Marcella. The smell of alcohol wafting towards him was enough to make his head spin.

"For your hard work. Drink up," Oswald said, offering one of the glasses.

Tobias had no doubts he would collapse to the floor if he drank it, but he couldn't resist the assertive offer, and he downed the drink. The absence of any alcoholic flavors and the slight astringent aftertaste revealed it was something other than what he had imagined. "Wait. This is a mana potion, isn't it?"

"I needed half a bottle for myself and I couldn't bear to waste the rest."

"Thank you very much for your thoughtfulness."

"Just my leftovers." His adamant rejection of the compliment was only a slight annoyance.

After he'd chugged the potion, an unnecessary question began to bother Tobias. "Are your fingernails okay, Chairman Zola?"

Oswald furrowed his brows ever so slightly, then gently waved his right hand with his glass still in it. "All better, as you can see. Did Dahlia notice as well?" Right after the enchantment, he had covered his bloodied right hand with a towel; save for his thumb, all of his fingernails had split wide open. A loud scream would've been the proper response, but the only thing this man had let out was a trickle of cold sweat.

"No, I don't believe she did."

"Good. I should not like to look weak in front of a lady. You put on quite the brave face as well and managed to remain on your feet despite emptying your mana." Oswald didn't receive a reply as he filled his guest's glass with real liquor this time; Tobias reckoned there was no way out of drinking it. Oswald

continued, “Just the alcohol speaking, but Mr. Orlando, I have a question I have always wanted to ask you.”

“What might that be?”

“What is your reason for deserting Dahlia in favor of your current wife?” He might have been smiling, but his tone was icy cold; the abruptness of the question also gave Tobias pause. “Some time ago at a barons’ dinner party, Carlo boasted of his new apprentice’s fine magic control and careful work, even claiming there were no doubts that he would become a tremendous magical toolmaker. Frankly, it was shocking to learn that the apprentice was you.”

“You must think me a fool.”

“Oh, yes, an absolute fool. I could not fathom what was in your head when you decided to abandon your fiancée—someone to whom you were engaged for a long time, might I add—at the last minute before your wedding. It reminded me a great deal of my former wife, who eloped with another man.”

“Whuh?” An odd noise escaped from Tobias’s mouth when he heard such shocking words.

Oswald swirled his drink before continuing with the same lack of hesitation as before. “See, after my first wife eloped with my apprentice, I very nearly gave up everything in life. I had always wanted to hear the other side of the story, so to say.”

It wasn’t a question Tobias felt he needed to answer; he could just as easily give a very pretty excuse as he could gloss it over. Knocking back his drink extracted the honesty out of him. “It may be laughable, but I had been bewitched at first sight. It wasn’t an instant decision, but in the end, I realized the love I had for her was true and I wanted a relationship with her. I wanted to protect her and I wanted nothing but her. I could see nothing but her.” He knew his words were cliché, and being a man so helplessly in love was an embarrassment.

Oswald did likewise with his glass. “I might not agree, but I will not laugh; love at first sight and forbidden love are two things with which I am well acquainted. Do you regret it?”

“I...” he paused for a moment before continuing, “suppose I do. I regret hurting Dahlia and doing things so poorly. I feel as though no amount of apologies would ever suffice.”

“I see. Then would you give up on your wife in order to fix what you can?”

“No. Not at all.” Tobias knew he had made many mistakes. He knew he had hurt Dahlia and dragged many people into trouble. But even if he were to lose everything else, he would not want to lose Emilia; Tobias was firm about that, as cowardly and pathetic as he may have been.

“A change of topics. Your evenness and stability were very admirable, and you have a discerning eye for magic. If you endeavor for another twenty—no, fifteen years, I say you will surpass where I am now.”

“You flatter me.” He could but politely smile, given the change of topics as well. No amount of hard work would elevate him to the delicate perfection of Oswald’s magic.

“I have nothing to gain by humoring a man such as yourself.” His silver eyes bore straight into Tobias, causing him to sit up straight without fully realizing it. “Dahlia originally came to me for help, but when I failed to adapt to her magic, you became involved. Therefore, I believe I owe you too. I am sure there are things in that spellbook of yours that no amount of reading will make easy to execute. When that happens, please come to me through your company, and I shall teach you as much as I can.”

“I wouldn’t want to trouble you, Chairman Zola. Besides, the work I have completed today is nothing compared to the tuition I would owe you.” A nobleman and chairman like Oswald should know full well about the situation within Orlando & Co.

“What problem is there in a business meeting between magical toolmakers? Though it may not look like it, I am set to become a viscount next year and I frequent the castle too. I have many friends who would lend me their help as well. I assure you that you have nothing to lose if the world finds out we are acquainted. As for tuition and the sort, we can discuss that whenever the time comes.”

Tobias lowered his head. “Thank you very much.” It was true that he had no

one else to turn to for help. Carlo had said in the letter that he could ask Professor Lina Lauren, but it wouldn't be right for Tobias to do so, as Dahlia had been her assistant for a couple of years.

"It is because I owe so much to Carlo, and I intend to pay it back to his apprentices. And let's see..." Oswald pondered for a moment. "Shall I tell you a story of a severed relationship from my younger days as well?"

"Your relationship, sir?" Tobias narrowed his eyes in doubt that it could possibly relate to him.

"When I was still a young man, I gave a bangle to this beautiful friend of mine who came from a merchant family. It was not for our engagement, but it functioned the same way—you see, she had been bothered by the men trying to woo her at work. Spring turned to autumn, and when it came time for her to return the temporary ward, she had a bright smile on her face and an engagement bracelet studded with a black gemstone, saying I should save the bangle for someone else. Well, her husband turned out to be an awfully jealous man and our relationship did not last much longer."

"Uh, I see..." What could he possibly have said to Oswald's sudden story of his youth? Perhaps the man was drunk already and he wasn't the type to show it, Tobias considered as he finished his glass of scorpio.

"My friend's mother was a commoner who had married into a noble family. However, the nobleman passed away suddenly, and so she remarried to a merchant and brought her daughter along," Oswald said. Tobias didn't ask for clarification, but he had heard a nobleman's child would ordinarily remain in the family instead due to considerations like magic and succession. Oswald continued, "The daughter—my friend—had no magic whatsoever, so her mother most likely understood it would be best to bring her daughter with her. Nobles with little mana are often cast aside and treated poorly, you see. And though she possessed no magic, my friend was blessed with many other gifts, like her talent with numbers and her gorgeous red hair."

"Erm, Chairman Zola?" No names were attached to this anecdote, but Tobias had an odd feeling he knew who this friend of Oswald's was.

"Being involved in the family trade meant that she knew well the capabilities

of the nobility. It was only understandable that her family wanted her to have that power, and perhaps she dreamed of it as well.”

Tobias had heard that his mother had been born to a family of merchants. She possessed no magic, and she had had glossy auburn hair too. But if his mother had had a nobleman father and a commoner mother, then that would mean Emilia’s situation was not so different from hers. Even though there was the family business, his mother had always supported Tobias in his choice to take up magical toolmaking. She had never chastised him for ending his engagement either. But now, mother spent her days cooped up at home, keeping everyone at arm’s length. Everything all together was just heart-wrenching.

“That ends my reminiscing,” Oswald said. “With the Rossetti Trading Company hiring you as subcontractors and Dahlia asking for your help this time, Orlando & Co. should be able to bounce back. Of course, the future rides on Mr. Ireneo and you.”

“I mean, I only bring trouble to the family business.”

“Perhaps. Dahlia may have forgiven you this time, but you ought not to commit the same mistake again. Your future as a magical toolmaker may very well be built on an ever-tumbling path of sand, but you must crawl up and out of that antlion pit.” Oswald did not mince words, but that made him all the easier to understand.

“But, well, I have done what I have done.”

The silvery eyes that stared back contained neither tepid pity nor cold contempt. “Your business know-how and discerning eye for magic mean that you have paths other than magical toolmaking you could take. If you wish to escape your current situation, I could get you connected with high-ranking nobles who could protect you.”

“No, thank you. The only way to redeem myself is to strive as a magical toolmaker.”

“Good. You still have pride in you.” Oswald broke into a grin—one not dissimilar to Carlo’s. “Do not sink into the pit. Crawl, crawl up and out, Tobias Orlando, and you will reach where I am. Show me how you proudly declare yourself as the apprentice of the magical toolmaker Carlo Rossetti. That is the

tuition I shall charge you.”

Tobias felt less like a man and more like a husk; he could only let his head hang low. “Will that day ever come to me?”

“That day will only come if you seize it. Did you not learn from Carlo? ‘If something doesn’t work, think outside the box and try again. Repeat until it does,’ he always said.”

“I couldn’t count the number of times I have heard that...”

“As I did too. ‘You can do it if you put your mind to it’ was another one of his favorite phrases. But look at where I am now. I could not have achieved what I have if not for that.”

“Thank you...” Tobias accepted the towel he was given and pressed it against his face. Rubbing his eyes would only cause them to redden and puff up, and then Emilia would notice and she would worry and he would have no excuses for her; he could but try suppressing the tears streaming down his face.

“As someone with more experience in being married, I have one more lesson for you. I know how obstinate men can be, but you ought to communicate with your wife. Much as I did before, you lack words.”

“The same as you, *professor*?”

“Yes, Tobias. Do not presume that because you are a married couple, you can get your feelings across without voicing them. No, that is the root of mistakes and misunderstandings. Be not sparing with words to your loved ones.”

Beyond the open door were Ermelinda looking on with a beautiful smile and Emilia failing to hide her red eyes. Faced with his wife trying to hold back tears, Tobias didn’t know what expression he should have. He decided he needed to take Emilia’s hands into his and that she needed her to know how he had felt and how he did feel.

Oswald activated his anti-eavesdropping device and set it between him and Tobias, who had already turned away to walk towards Emilia. In a clear voice, Oswald said, “If you do indeed love someone, be sure they know. She left me because I couldn’t.”

Good Night and Pleasant Dreams

Dahlia and Volf had sped from Oswald's estate to the temple, but as it was a woman's room, only Dahlia had entered to see Irma. Irma had still been constantly vomiting the little she had in her stomach as the toolmaker put the magic-leeching bracelet on her. Unfortunately, this wasn't the movies—the bracelet was no instant cure, and only time would tell if Irma's situation improved. At the very least, her nausea had soon stopped, and after she had taken a bottle of potion, she'd passed right out. Dahlia had panicked slightly, worried that Irma had taken a turn for the worse, but the priestess in attendance had explained that Irma was finally able to get some deep sleep, as her magic had stabilized. Relieved, Dahlia had left the room; there had been nothing to do except to wish for Irma's recovery.

There had been more relief waiting for her. Volf, who had been sitting in the waiting area while she was in the sick room, had explained that a Scalfarotto messenger had come by and relayed that Irma was to receive her full recovery the next day. It would be within the seven-day time frame, meaning that Irma's fingers should heal from the crystallization. After urging Marcella to let them know should he need anything, the two of them had left the temple behind.

Though Dahlia would have loved to start sawing logs, her empty stomach would have kept her up; she had had little for breakfast and nothing for lunch, and it was approaching evening by now. Dahlia and Volf had done away with being embarrassed and embraced the fact that their bellies were growling synchronously. Along the way, the coach had stopped so Volf could pick up a few items at the food stalls. They had found themselves with panini, crespelle, and a platter of sliced fruits, and after reheating some chicken soup that had already been made, the tired twosome was ready to recover.

For once, their meal wasn't accompanied by much conversation, and right as they finally finished eating, the gate bell rang. Dahlia spied the Scalfarotto family coach through the window.

“A celebration gift from my brother: the scarlatterba we had before.” Volf came back with a large black wooden box he’d received from the driver; inside was what looked to be a supersized sage plant. Curiously, wringing the nectar out of its blooms produced something like a liqueur, which Dahlia really enjoyed. There were even more glossy white flowers than on the plant from last time. “Here, let me,” Volf said. With experienced dexterity, he plucked a flower and rolled it up from the pedicel to squeeze the drink out into both their glasses, filling the room with its syrupy floral aromas and alcoholic fumes. Just as they had done last time, Dahlia took hers neat while Volf mixed it in a splash of carbonated water.

“To Irma’s recovery. Cheers,” she said.

“To the success of the bracelet. Cheers.”

The clinking of glasses signaled to Dahlia’s subconscious that she could finally relax. Like last time, the honey-sweet and rather strong liqueur was very delicious. But as grateful as she was, receiving such a precious gift gave her a bit of pause. “I was wondering—what’s something I can give Lord Guido in return? Not just for the scarlatterba, but also for everything else he has provided for us...” There was the guarantor thing, Jonas’s fire dragon scales, Irma’s full recovery—it went on. Money wasn’t the currency to pay for the ever-growing list of favors, and so Dahlia racked her brains for what she could repay him with.

“It’s no rush, but my brother said he’d like a pair of the camp stoves to keep at the castle.”

“I hope he isn’t planning on grilling squid in his office.”

“Of course n—hm, well, I sure hope not anyway.” Volf’s confidence faltered for a moment, and his eyes darted away from hers. The stench of dried meats grilling away would permeate the walls, his clothes, his papers... Surely, the idea was too outrageous to even consider, and if Guido did give it a try, his attendant Jonas would put a stop to it.

“What about you, Volf? You don’t grill in your estate, do you?”

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about regarding that. I’ve set some compact stoves in the two rooms near the kitchen so that anyone can use them whenever they’d like. Plus, nothing like the smell of barbecue to whet

appetites, right? I'm sure if they try it once, my brother, Master Jonas, and all the personnel there will understand..."

"Is that right?" In that case, they must have all been on the same wavelength. Still, if everyone could use the compact magical stoves whenever they wished, the room and their clothes must've been stained with odors. Dahlia decided that on top of four camp stoves, she would gift them a set of air fresheners for the room and deodorizers for their clothes.

"Anyone else you have in mind?"

"Tobias said he won't take any payment, not even for his time."

Volf paused. "So, you've gone back to calling him by his first name."

"Just this time. It didn't feel natural to be so formal when we were working together, and I doubt we'll see each other again anyway," she said. There was a very tiny chance they might work again in the future, but those occasions would be few and far between. "For Professor Oswald, I'll be sending him a case of scorio and the material costs. He also waived his fees and will instead have me assist him on future large-scale projects. That will eventually pay off, but I'd like to send him something first; I just can't think of what, though."

"Hm, yeah. I don't know what Oswald would like either."

"I'll ask Ivano for his opinion, then."

Quite some time after this conversation and unbeknownst to Dahlia, Ivano would send Oswald a large gift of dried forest serpent.

"Was enchanting the bracelet difficult?"

"Very," Dahlia answered. "But I learned a lot as well. And Professor Oswald's control of his magic was the most amazing thing—he was delicate yet quick, and perhaps even more accurate than my father. Tobias also pointed out a few things to me, so I'll be working on my control starting from tomorrow."

She seemed so excited to talk about her work after Volf brought up the topic, but there was one thing that still bothered him. "Do you regret not being able to work with Orlando any more?"

“It has its downsides, but it’s much more enjoyable now. Don’t worry.”

Volf bit his lip but hid it from her. “Don’t worry,” she would always say, but was she really okay? Was she just hiding her lingering feelings and pain? Was she merely hiding her wounds? He let slip a sentence better left unsaid. “But, Dahlia, you told him you still loved—”

“What?! No, I didn’t,” she said firmly. “Oh! The anti-eavesdropper cuts in and out, so you must’ve missed the context around it! I absolutely didn’t mean him; I was talking about the color of his magic!” She waved both hands in front of her, frantically denying the accusation.

It was a little reassuring. “What do you mean?”

“When Tobias makes waterproof cloth, the surface of it turns blue and then glows in many colors. It looks like the clear sky after the rain, and I was just telling him how pretty I thought it was and how much I loved it. *It*, not him.”

“So, that’s what it was? Sorry for pressing you about it. I was just, well, curious about whether you still had feelings for him...”

“We’re just fellow apprentices and toolmakers. That’s what we talked about today—work. Besides, I’ve already told you, haven’t I? ‘Not one bit,’ I said.”

“Right, of course.” When they’d reunited at the restaurant and bumped into Tobias and Emilia, Volf had asked the same question and received the same answer. “No feelings whatsoever?”

“Not one bit,” she replied instantly, just as she had that day.

Volf then asked her about the workshop, the magical processes, the spellbook, and whatnot, and Dahlia answered his questions without any hesitation, flushing away any hard feelings he had left. However, in the end, it was she who had a bit of a sour face.

“As grateful as I am for my father, Tobias, and even Ivano protecting me, do I really seem that weak? Everybody seems to want me tucked behind them.”

“You’re plenty strong, Dahlia. It’s just that men are protective creatures.”

“Troublesome creatures. I don’t want anyone behind or in front of me, only beside me,” she said as she munched on thinly-sliced apple to go with her drink.

“Oh, I almost forgot—my father tucked a letter in between the pages of that spellbook you found. It was addressed to Tobias, though.”

“You read it too, didn’t you?” He remembered how her green eyes had fluttered on the verge of tears.

“I did. The body of the text, asking him to protect me, was touching, but the postscript ruined everything.”

“That bad, huh?”

“It said ‘I leave all of my picture books to my son. Hide whichever you like for yourself when you clean them out.’ I have no idea what possessed him to write something like that,” she said. Volf felt the same way. “If the books are in his will, then we can’t just incinerate them, right? I was told they might be worth something at a used bookstore too.”

“Should I, um, take them for you?” Volf didn’t know how to react or what to say; he had to tread carefully lest he step in a trap.

“Could you please? Or if you know anyone who would like the books, feel free to offload them too. I’m sure my father would rather that than have them burned.” Her eyes remained vacant as Volf refilled her glass.

“I sure hope Irma gets well soon.” Volf understood that one false step would be the end of him and so opted to switch topics.

Dahlia smiled and nodded. “Me too. You must be worried since you didn’t get to see her. She’s lost a bit of weight, but she’s still tough as leather.”

He had been at the temple too, but with Irma in a gown, he couldn’t see her in person. Instead, he’d spent his time talking with Marcella.

“It’ll be a fun time next year,” Dahlia continued. “We’ll have to plan something for them.”

“Yeah, I’ll ask my brother and see what ideas he has. I can tell you’re really happy too.”

“I’m glad I’m a magical toolmaker, glad that I have my own company. I’m happy I had you so we could save Irma.” Her slight monotonous tone said that she was starting to feel the alcohol.

Volf couldn't let someone so happy drink alone, and he wrung out more nectar into his glass. "To the Nuvolaris. May the three of them have a happy future together."

"Cheers."

After clinking glasses yet again, he noticed she was staring straight at him, but those bright green eyes were welling up with tears. "Dahlia?"

"Volf, do me a favor and outlive me." She could barely keep her glass in her hand, and so Volf helped her set it down on the table.

"Outlive you? That's out of the blue."

"Just do it, Volf. Live longer than me."

"I *am* older than you, you know? By chronological order, I'd be first." He didn't know what brought it to her mind, but he guessed it might have something to do with his occupation.

"No, you're not. I'm older on the inside."

"What are you getting at? That I'm a child at heart?"

"Heh. Just know that I'm waaaaay older than you are, so you have to live a long life and outlive me. You have to, you have to!" Dahlia drilled it into him almost as if she were admonishing him, albeit incoherently.

Fact was that he was older than her and his job at the Order of Beast Hunters was to fight monsters. The Scarlet Armors were even referred to as those at death's door. It wasn't a promise he had any confidence in keeping. But with her pestering, begging him like this, he succumbed. "As you wish."

"Good!" Dahlia beamed, satisfied. She sank into the armchair with her legs folded to one side and her head resting on the back of the seat. Her eyes were closed and the glass in her hand was empty.

"Dahlia?" Volf received only soft breathing in response. His experience with expeditions meant that he had to be a light sleeper and had to function with little sleep, but it was no easy feat for anyone. On the other hand, Dahlia had used up so much mana and had only napped for about two hours this morning, so it was no surprise that the drink had made her so sleepy. If anything, he felt

bad for having topped up her glass.

In any case, she was leaning crooked in the armchair. Volf would have felt guilty about waking her up, and so he instead chose to admire the view of her sleeping. She looked so innocent and vulnerable, like she wasn't ever guarded against him.

"Guarded?" he mumbled to himself, and his errant thought put a bashful smile on his face—the fact that she trusted him and felt so safe around him was hardly a bad thing. Despite what others may have said about their somewhat odd relationship, Volf was unironically grateful for the blessing that was a friend who could just be herself around him. And that was fine. Having someone beside him to share a smile and nothing more was just fine.

"Pardon me." Volf scooped up Dahlia from the armchair and put her on the sofa. The blanket he had used earlier this morning had already been put away, so he reached for the throw nearby. Having heard the story about how she had fallen off the sofa, he moved the armchairs over to fence her in; she could toss and turn as much as she wanted to and she'd be safe from the perils of gravity.

Even with all the shuffling around, Dahlia showed no signs of rousing from her sleep. Her slightly disheveled red hair dangled atop her soft, pale cheek, begging Volf to brush it aside—but he regained his senses right before caressing her, and he pulled his hand back. "Guess I'm drunk too." Volf smacked his face with both hands; he hadn't intended to hit himself hard, but the resulting clap was an aural delight.

Locking up behind him wasn't a problem. The Green Tower had two sets of locks—one for the front door and one for the gate. As the gate could only be opened by those who were registered, Dahlia had said that the door could be left unlocked as long as the gate was closed. Besides, it wouldn't be proper for him and his lack of sobriety to remain in the room.

"Good night." It reminded him of the day he and Dahlia had first had a meal together and how she had said the same thing. Wishing each other a good night and pleasant dreams was a custom in this country among friends and family, but Volf hadn't uttered or heard the phrase in over a decade; it was "I'm hitting the sack" in the barracks or "Good night, Lord Scalfarotto" at the estate. Her

words that day had surprised him with how warm they'd felt to the ears, and ever since meeting Dahlia, Volf had never once replayed his mother's death in his dreams. Her dying alone was a nightmare he didn't care to have again—he didn't care to have *any* nightmares again.

The lap blanket was just a bit small to cover Dahlia. He pulled it down to her feet and used his jacket to cover her shoulders instead. Fortunately, the night wasn't too chilly, and that hopefully meant he wouldn't be catching a cold.

"Good night, Dahlia. Pleasant dreams." He whispered his prayer out to the ether and wondered whether it would reach her ears. But that gentle smile on her sleeping face was enough satisfaction, and so he crept out under the night sky.

Proud of Her Friend

The crisp blue above, without a single streak of white, announced it was autumn, and both the air and Dahlia's pace were brisk as she left the carriage stop. It had been three full days since she had completed the bracelet, and so she had come to the temple to check on Irma's recovery. Unfortunately, Volf was busy with work; he had taken the past few days off, so there must be training he had to catch up on right about now.

The other day, after having a bit too much to drink and falling asleep in the living room, she had woken up to find herself on the couch surrounded by the armchairs, covered by a throw blanket and his jacket. Dahlia had no recollection of how she'd gotten to that state or when he'd left. But as Volf had napped on the couch the morning before and his jacket had been on top of her, his scent had filled her senses; in the morning, she had instinctively reached her hand out and failed to find him beside her, though that was something she could never admit to anyone.

"Good morning, Marcella."

"Morning, Dahlia! And thank you so, so much for getting Irma better." Marcella bowed deeply in the hallway. Two things were evident: that he had been waiting for her and that, by the color in his face, *he* was doing much better too.

"My pleasure. But it wasn't just me, you know? Everybody had a hand in it."

"Course. Know that I'm grateful to them too. Once Irma's discharged, I'll be making my rounds to thank everyone. I've got a lot to prepare for too."

"That's right, like baby clothes and the crib, *dad*."

"Gosh, you're gonna make me blush..."

"Or perhaps you would prefer to be called 'daddy' first?"

"That sure ain't helpin'!" Marcella ruffled the back of his head, laughing. His hair was noticeably shorter and his neckline and brows had been trimmed too;

it didn't take any guessing to figure out who had tidied him up.

"I see Irma has a pair of scissors in her hands again."

"She was at it right after they cast full recovery on her yesterday. I wish you coulda seen the smile on her face when she picked up her scissors and razor again. When the priest came to check up on her, she practically held him down to cut his hair."

"That sure sounds like her..." Dahlia nodded. "Was the priest okay with it, though?"

"Yeah, all of the other priests loved it too." Irma was a hairstylist through and through, so it was no wonder she would start working even before she got out of the temple. Her productivity must have been directly tied to her health, and at this rate, she was bound to have many new clients by the time she returned home. "Go and see her, Dahlia. I'mma go get a few things from the cafeteria."

"Are you sure this wouldn't be enough?" she asked, lifting up a large basket. "The only thing I'm missing are drinks." She had stuffed it with more than enough food for four, and that should have covered them unless there were others on their way.

"That might just be enough for Irma alone. I ain't kiddin' when I say she eats as much as three people do."

"She must be making up for her lost appetite and her expended magic. I'll be sure to bring even more next time, then."

"Thanks, Dahlia. My mother *and* hers just got on my case yesterday about how my cooking's too heavy and salty and how it ain't fit for a pregnant lady. One more thing I've gotta learn." With the amount of physical exertion at his courier job, he needed that extra sodium and strong spices not just to replenish his body but to accompany a drink. That would certainly be less than ideal for Irma and the child in her belly, and Dahlia thought maybe he ought to ask for help from his mother and in-law.

"Have both your mothers come by the temple?"

"Yeah, yesterday afternoon and first thing this morning. Both of them came together, so you can imagine how lively things got."

“And your fathers too? Work?”

“No, the men had drunk themselves to a hangover, so they couldn’t come. They’ll probably head home first, then come back another time with my brothers. Things are sure going to get rowdy.”

“I have no doubt about that.” Dahlia and Marcella laughed together before parting ways.

As Dahlia’s hand moved to knock, Irma’s door swung open and a priestess with long, silver hair done up in an intricate braid walked out. They exchanged a quick smile before they passed each other by. “How are you feeling, Irma?”

“Superb!” Irma, sitting in her bed with rosy cheeks, wasn’t in her hospital gown but her usual blue shirt. In her right hand was a comb—needless to say, the priestess’s braids were her handiwork. She would restart her business here and now were she able to stand.

“And your hands are back to normal too?”

The answer was obvious, but she demonstrated anyway by going *snip snip* with her pair of scissors. “Yup. The deacon came and cured me yesterday. It was my first time seeing a silver stole!”

“Whoa. This silver stole is a deacon?”

“Mm-hmm. He was one of the four deacons and he introduced himself as Aroldo, but I still ended up calling him Mr. Deacon instead. Thankfully, they were easygoing about it.”

“I see. Did the healing magic take much time?”

“Not at all. Father Aroldo held both hands above me, and like pure white snowflakes, his magic fell onto me. My hands were coarse one moment, then soft the next. Same for my shoulders, knees, and whatever else that got hard to move.” Irma didn’t use the term “full recovery”; she must’ve been kept in the dark so as to not burden her with the thought of finances. Dahlia chose not to correct her either.

However, what did catch her concern was that Aroldo was a deacon. Both he

and Dahlia had joined the Order of Beast Hunters on their trip to the hog farm the other day, but she hadn't been told of his rank and position within the temple. She wondered if Irma was talking about somebody else with the same name, but the fact that this Aroldo had a silver stole as well indicated it was no coincidence. Someone most definitely should have informed Dahlia that he was a deacon, though. She was frightened by the thought of meeting him again, but recalling the priest who had drunk too much to walk and had to be carried by Gildo, she wondered how much dignity the man really had. He must've sobered up by the time he returned to the temple, or so she hoped.

"Oh, good. It sounds like even your stiff shoulders got better," Dahlia said.

"Better than when I came in. If not for you, I wouldn't be able to go home tomorrow afternoon."

"That's great to hear! I'm sure Marcella is excited to welcome you home too."

"I wouldn't be so sure. I'm going to see if he's been keeping up with chores."

Dahlia laughed—if with fear for Marcella—at Irma's matriarchal act. "No need to scrutinize the house. You know he's been worried sick about you."

"I've got to show him everything while I can still move around! After I give birth, I won't be moving around for a while, you know?"

"Wait, is there still something wrong, Irma?"

Her friend shook her head. "It's not that. Hey, Dahlia? I haven't told Marcella yet, but"—she paused for a brief moment before continuing—"that priestess you just saw? She told me I have twins."

"Twins?!"

"They're both very healthy, she said. I don't know if they're boys or girls, but either way, I'll have both my hands full taking care of them..."

"That's for sure..." Taking care of one newborn was usually too much work for one person already, and she'd have twice that.

"Marcella's mother said he was a demon when he was little, so what if both twins turn out to be like him?"

"Look who's talking. Do you remember how often auntie would scold you for

climbing trees and rooftops? Your kids are going to be rambunctious no matter who they take after.”

“Please don’t say that, Dahlia. You’re making my head hurt...”

“Hee hee. You’ll do just fine, Irma.” The thought was terrifying, but, for the time being at the very least, it was so very exciting.

“Hey, Dahlia?” Irma reached her hand out, and Dahlia took it into hers and sat at the edge of the bed. Irma leaned in, her slightly coarse brown hair brushing against Dahlia’s arm; the gloss would come back as soon as she returned home. “Thank you for saving me and my children.”

“It wasn’t just me, you know? There’s Volf, Professor Oswald, and Tobias too. Everyone lent a hand.”

“Even so, you were the first to set everything in motion. Thank you. I really, really mean it.”

“Of course. You’re my sister, Irma.”

Irma smiled with her eyes. “And in a year, I’ll be ‘mommy.’ Still feels a little weird.”

“That’s right, you and Marcella will be ‘mommy’ and ‘daddy.’” Just thinking about how they’d each have a baby in their arms brought a broad smile to Dahlia’s face. She was sure they would be the most patient and loving parents deserving of those titles.

“Me and the kids will be healthy; Marcella won’t be crying; grandma, grandpa, and the uncles will be busy celebrating; we’ll be racking our brains thinking of names; we’ll have a mountain of baby clothes and diapers. Once we can get the twins under control and things calm down, you, Volf, Lucia, Marcella, and I will have to celebrate with a drink.”

“You can’t be consuming alcohol when you’re breastfeeding.”

“I know, I know. I’ll toast with a glass of milk or something.” So as not to bump her belly, Irma hugged Dahlia from the side, and she returned the gesture. It had been mere days since Irma had worn the bracelet, but it was obvious she had regained some of her lost weight. To get her back to one

hundred percent, though, Dahlia decided she ought to cook a balanced and nutritious meal for mother and children. Irma looked her way. “Hey, Dahlia? On second thought, I’ll be keeping Marcella to myself.”

“Good idea. I wouldn’t know what to do with him.”

“It won’t be easy, but we’ll be taking care of our children.”

Nothing made Dahlia happier than being able to turn ‘If anything happens to me, I want you and Marcella to raise my child’ into something to laugh at. Even Irma, drilling her head against Dahlia’s shoulder, couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re going to give me a bruise, Irma.”

“Oops, sorry. Thank you, Dahlia...” Irma squeezed her tightly; the skin on her hands was pale, soft, and supple.

Dahlia was sure the twins would grow up in no time too. That warmth she didn’t want to lose forever, that she wanted to protect, was in her arms.

“I’m so happy that my children are healthy...and that I’m alive... Thank you, Dahlia, thank you, thank you...” she said in a scratchy voice as cold tears trickled down Dahlia’s neck.

“I might not be near my father’s level yet, but”—Dahlia paused as she attempted to hold back the burning sensation in the back of her throat—“I’ve become somewhat of an amazing magical toolmaker, haven’t I?” It was Dahlia’s turn this time to dry her eyes on Irma’s shoulder.

Irma laughed as her tears continued streaming down her face. “Mm-hmm. The friend I’m so proud of is *such* an amazing magical toolmaker.”



A Father's Decision

"My utmost gratitude for your assistance!"

"I am glad to hear that your wife has recovered. You must be looking forward to next year."

It had been a week since the completion of the bracelet, and Marcella was bowing at a right angle in the parlor of the Zola estate. Oswald and Ermelinda both beamed.

Standing beside Marcella was Ivano, who politely gave his thanks and directed attention to the gifts they had brought. "A few trifling things to express our thanks, but I hope you will accept them nonetheless." Marcella had carried two cases of scorpio here, each containing a dozen bottles; he couldn't help doubling what Oswald had asked for. Ivano had brought three medium-sized cans packed full of dried forest serpent. Apparently, its nourishing properties for the body and rejuvenating properties for the skin has made it quite the fad within the capital as of late, and Ivano was sure that would make it a perfect gift for a man like Oswald.

"Thank you very much. I'll have my maids take them in later," Oswald said.

"It might be a bit heavy for a lady, so how about I carry them instead?" offered Marcella.

"Would it be okay to accept his offer, my dear?"

Answering his wife, he said, "Yes, it would be much appreciated if you could do that for us."

Without even breaking a sweat, Marcella followed behind Ermelinda with the presents in his arms.

After watching the two of them leave the parlor, Ivano turned to face Oswald again. "Professor Oswald, is it true that you've welcomed Tobias to come visit you for help?"

“My, what good ears you have, Ivano.”

“Not at all. I already understood that you are a very kind person, professor, but it still came as a shock to me. His value is one thing, but was it really worth choosing to save that man?”

“Oh? Is that how you see it?” Oswald’s eyes looked as though he were speaking to a child. He sighed dramatically, which Ivano didn’t appreciate. “Tobias is rather skilled. That much should be a given, seeing as how he was Carlo’s apprentice. And his forte differs from Dahlia’s; if any difficulties with work were to crop up in the future, would it not be an asset to have another source of capability?”

“That could easily be solved if our company simply sent a request to Orlando & Co.” Ivano’s slightly rushed cadence exposed his irritation in the matter; he cleared his throat to reset himself.

“Perhaps you wish to have those two—that is to have Orlando & Co. prostrating themselves before Dahlia? To demonstrate the power and prosperity of the Rossetti Trading Company?”

“Assuming that were true, would it be so wrong? It would be letting them off easy considering what they have done to the Rossetti family.”

“No, I did not judge it to be wrong. I would even say that a very kind and adept man such as yourself has been holding back,” said the professor. He remained stoic, even when reflecting Ivano’s words back at him. “If you so wish, I am sure Lord Guido can have the entire Orlando clan disappear once and for all.”

“I have no intentions of going so far; that would be preposterous!”

“I am but half-joking,” Oswald said, unperturbed. “To have them beg at your feet will breed resentment, and before long, they will bare their fangs at the Rossetti Company. You could also have them fizzle out over time. But better yet, why not win them over earlier for your peace of mind?”

“How could there be peace of mind? Once bitten, twice shy, as they say.”

“When one is at the end of one’s rope, whoever extends a hand one’s way will be thanked as one’s savior. Especially if the one in need is young and yet to

be jaded, they would do well to listen. The rest depends on their teacher's instruction. My wife Ermelinda has thought about this, you see."

You are older than she is, yet you do not understand?—so Ivano read between the lines, but he had nothing to say to refute Oswald. Instead, the student asked the teacher, "Do you think I am too emotional, professor?"

"No, I am not saying that. Regardless of whether Tobias is Carlo's apprentice, I would not extend my hand if I did not see a promising toolmaker with tenacity. However, he is young and talented, and if he is serious about improving himself, it will be only a matter of time before he reaches my level."

"I see you think very highly of Tobias."

"I saw and felt Carlo in him. I would prefer if Carlo's apprentice lived, so that he may pass down Carlo's craft."

But why should Tobias be the one to pass it down? Carlo Rossetti's name, blood, and craft needed only Dahlia Rossetti. "How surprising. Have you become sentimental, Professor Oswald?" None of the sarcasm that laced his tone was intentional.

"Mm. I am the sentimental type. If someone is truly irredeemable, I may speak to the right people about them." Something about his gaze or his voice sent shivers down Ivano's spine, and it rendered him speechless. Much like Guido, Oswald had a chilling atmosphere about him. Perhaps it was something unique to noblemen like them. He continued, "I do not ask you to forgive or forget, and I have no intentions of policing how you feel. Even if drawing the ire of another man because of a matter regarding a lady may be a source of pride, drawing the ire of your subordinates is a foolish goal in the world of business. Speaking from experience, getting bit when you let your guard down is very painful. Would you not agree that leading someone away to prevent that outcome and managing them properly falls within a businessman's responsibilities?"

Being on the receiving end of Oswald's usual indomitable smile, Ivano could only wave the white flag. "Thank you for your words of wisdom."

"Dahlia would do well to learn this as part of her chairperson training..."

“I would be honored to take her stead.”

“Very well, Ivano, I shall charge you with the task. I would much prefer to avoid earning her ire as well.” His silvery eyes curved into smiling slivers, lest Ivano forget that the silver fox was sly and impregnable. Even after being simmered in a stew, that fox meat made of pure silver would be too tough to leave teeth marks in. “To tell you the truth, the top reason why I opened my doors to Tobias is because of my son.”

“Your son?” Ivano repeated the words that caught him by surprise. When Oswald turned his gaze to the garden, Ivano did too and saw an overgrown scarlet sage plant.

“Indeed. I am getting up there. One day, I shall be gone, and my son will need someone to guide him on his path of a magical toolmaker. In that case, wouldn’t he do well to have a mentor who is skilled and close to his own age?”

“I had thought that was why you have Ms. Dahlia as a student.”

“That is true too, but the more people there are on whom he can lean, the more assured I will be. Besides, once a woman is married, it would be difficult to take too much time from her. That, of course, depends on her husband and whether or not he is the jealous type.”

“Oh, true...” When the image of a black-haired youth flashed into his mind, it all made sense. There were many problems to be solved before that outcome would be realized, but that had nothing to do with Ivano. “As unworthy as I may be, I would love to seek out instruction. If you were in my position, professor, what would you do?”

“Hm, I would first develop a cooperative relationship with Ireneo Orlando and operate his company effectively. At the same time, I would ask Gabriella and Lord Fortunato for people tied to each of them, then plant those two in Orlando & Co. I would then ask Lord Gildovan Diels to be one of Rossetti Trading Company’s guarantors. Something like that, perhaps?”

“I see. Thank you very much. This has been enlightening.” Ivano tried his best to memorize those quick words of Oswald’s. Essentially, it boiled down to using Orlando & Co. well, putting in noble-tied personnel for safety and surveillance, then making allies of the high-ranking nobleman, that is, Gildo. The professor’s

casualness made it seem as though there wasn't much thought behind the plan, so would a simple commoner merchant like Ivano be able to pull it off?

One way to find out. Before he could mull it over, Marcella and Ermelinda returned. "I see the watchdog forewent the puppy, but I imagined he would have a black coat." Oswald just *had* to put in one last word.

Ivano did his darndest to stifle his laughter and simply bowed to the professor.



"Tobias!" As dusk was falling, Marcella rushed up to the man who stepped out of the Orlando & Co. building. He and Ivano had parted ways moments ago at the Merchants' Guild's carriage stop; Marcella wanted to thank Tobias privately.

"Marcella..."

"I heard about it from Dahlia. Thank you! I'm truly grateful to you. Irma's all better now too!" It had been long since the two men had seen each other, and perhaps that was why Marcella was especially animated in his speech, though Tobias seemed a little taken aback.

"Oh, I, erm, only played a very small part in the process. And a heartfelt congratulations to you and Irma."

"Thanks."

It's my fault that we can't have kids—so Marcella had once told Tobias. As Irma loved children, Marcella had expressed his guilt while they were out drinking. Tobias would always listen in silence and respond by clapping him on the shoulder.

Dahlia had Volf now. He was a great guy, and the two of them were great for each other. And despite the difference in social status, Marcella felt that they were always going to be friends with himself and Irma. That was why he had never felt the need to ask why Tobias had done what he'd done or meet with him again, despite occasionally feeling that the splinter had never left his skin.

And so, Marcella decided to do without pretenses and speak honestly. "You know, Tobias, when you ended things with Dahlia, I was so disappointed in

you.”

“I mean, can I really blame you?”

“I just couldn’t figure out why you’d change in a snap like that.”

“There’s nothing to figure out. It’s all my fault.”

“Come on, man! Do you really have no godsdamn excuse for your friend?!”
Marcella had come to thank Tobias, yet here he was berating him. If Marcella had gotten any excuse a few months ago, he would’ve socked Tobias in the face. But at least he would’ve had an answer. At least he would’ve been justified in thinking he was an asshole.

“Sorry.”

“All those things you did for Dahlia—secretly fixing the stairs, sanding the splinters off the workbench, pretending to have an errand nearby when you went to pick her up in the rain—wasn’t it because you loved her?”

“That was because...Chairwoman Rossetti and I share the same master and she is my junior. I can’t excuse my deplorable actions to you, Marcella.”
Suddenly, Tobias’s gloomy eyes flickered over Marcella’s shoulder, concerned about their surroundings.

Marcella worried that he’d caught him at a bad time. “Sorry. I came to thank you, but yet I’m yelling at you. Let me take you out to dinner for your help with the bracelet. We can talk—”

“Apologies, Marcella, but I would prefer if you could distance yourself from me from now on.”

“Excuse me?”

His friend, slightly bonier than before, cast his gaze onto the ground. “It’s for your sake. It’s not a good idea to get involved with me anymore. There are eyes watching me and our company at all times,” he said in a low voice.

“Volf isn’t that kinda guy.”

“Not him, but other companies and nobles. Think about if they dig into you and learn of your magic, Marcella. Think about Irma and your kid.”

“I—”

“I heard you joined the Rossetti Trading Company. If we have any personal exchanges from now on, there will be misunderstandings. So, please, you ought to stay away from me.”

Before Marcella set out, Ivano had warned him too. He had said it was fine to thank Tobias, but to think twice before socializing with him; after all, Marcella was due to become an employee of the Rossetti Trading Company, and furthermore, a knight of the Scalfarotto house. He had to remember to protect Dahlia, to avoid causing problems for her, and that Orlando & Co. was a subcontractor for the company. That was why Tobias’s words rang true. Volf had even told him that danger abounded for his children’s future. When Marcella Nuvolari became an employee of the Rossetti Company, he would become a knight of the Scalfarottos. That was the path he had chosen to protect Irma and his children.

But it wasn’t until now that he understood the choice he had made, and that he and the man before him had to go separate ways.

“Best wishes to Irma and your child, Marcella.” Tobias’s almond eyes pointed to the ground once again, as if his wish were a prayer. He had a slight smile on his face as he began to walk briskly past Marcella.

“Wait!” Marcella inadvertently grabbed Tobias hard enough to make him wince. His spur-of-the-moment reaction meant that he had no words prepared, and what next came out was brief. “I’ll owe you that dinner.”

“Thank you, Marcella.”

He released his trembling fingers from his friend’s arm, and the two men silently passed each other by. Marcella did not turn around towards those footsteps trailing off into the distance.

Interlude: Anguish, or the Conclusion to the Picture Books

Anguish.

In his room in the Scalfarotto villa, Volf had before him two great burlap sacks of picture books—no ordinary ones, mind you, but the bequests of Dahlia’s father Carlo, which contained skin tones aplenty. They had been “left for his son,” so Dahlia had said, and it was for that very reason Volf could not bring it upon himself to simply trade them to a bookstore for cold, hard coin. On the other hand, bringing them back to the barracks would undoubtedly draw unto him unwanted attention; he would not like to explain the circumstances in which he had acquired the literature. There was no other place where they belonged, and so Volf had brought the hemp bags back to the mansion. They had ended up at the back of his closet in his locked chambers, which he had forbidden the maids from entering during his absence.

The business with the bracelet meant he had had training to make up, and he had finally been able to return home today. So, he had taken out the sacks and placed them atop the table as he thought long and hard over where to store them (read: where he could hide them). Just as he realized what he had to do was to buy a large chest with a sturdy lock to keep in his closet, a knock came at the door.

Thinking it was the maids coming to clean his room, he opened the door to find two unexpected figures. “Brother, Master Jonas, is something the matter?”

“Sorry for dropping in on you. There’s something I wanted to talk to you about. May I come in?”

“Yes, by all means...” he said, his words hardly matching up with the trouble in his voice. He didn’t really want to be disturbed at this moment, but Guido might have something important to discuss in regard to Marcella’s situation, and so Volf invited both guests into his room and tossed the sacks against the wall.

“Volf, is there something that has been troubling you?”

“Huh?” It must’ve shown on his face, despite him trying his best to hide his anguish.

Sensing Volf’s fluster, Jonas explained, “The servants were worried about you, Lord Volf. They told me you seem to have a lot on your mind recently, and so I relayed the message to Lord Guido. I apologize for being nosy.” Volf hadn’t expected either that the servants would worry so much about him or that they would escalate the issue.

Before his brother could come up with an excuse, Guido, with his deep blue eyes, looked intently into his own. “You can talk to me, Volf. I’m your brother, and you know I’ll do anything I can to help you.” Standing behind his master, Jonas’s eyes of rust were pointed Volf’s way as well.

Their concern was real and Volf was not used to the attention, so he could not bear to keep it a secret any longer. “The truth is, well...” He spilled his guts, confessing about the contraband and its source, without his audience stopping him once.

“That’s what it’s all about? I see...” The elder Scalfarotto nodded to himself. “Well, at least it’s good to know it wasn’t a dismembered man contained in the two bags over there.”

“I wish I shared your humor, Guido.”

He smirked at his brother’s retort. “And you said Madam Rossetti’s father willed it to his son?”

“That is correct.” Volf swung the heavy, large sacks back onto the table—they really did weigh as much as one person.

“With this much, you wouldn’t be able to easily hide it all behind a bookshelf or under your bed...” Guido said. “There are these magical bookshelves with cabinet doors that can only be opened by people who are registered, usually for important files and confidential documents. They are regularly available at a magical tool shop, so let me get one of those for you. I’ll have it delivered, and by the end of the day, you can fill the shelves.”

“Shall I purchase the model that Lord Guido has, the one with the glass door

on the top shelf and wood on the subsequent ones? That way, it would look natural when you display your dictionaries, reference guides, and other presentable books.”

“Please do...”

“Very well, Lord Volf.” Jonas stepped out to put in the order. Volf was extremely grateful to have his brother and master to solve the problem and ease the anguish.

“Shall we bundle them up, then? Oh, there seems to be something in between the pages.” When Guido opened up one of the bags, he saw a loose sheet of paper jutting out from one of the picture books. On it was some illegible scrawling and some sort of formula—nothing that either brother understood, but it certainly had something to do with magical toolmaking.

“I believe that is one of Mr. Rossetti’s notes. It must have slipped past me.” After he hurriedly explained the memos, they took all of the picture books out from the bags and piled them up atop the table.

“We ought to go through them again to check for anything important.”

“You wouldn’t find it to be, I don’t know, uncomfortable?”

“I see it as art.” Guido’s deadpan expression was more than likely him trying his best to be delicate about the situation, and for that, Volf was sorry to have foisted the responsibility upon him.

And so, the two of them sat side by side and pored over the picture books. But given the matter at hand, thoughts of the original owner came to Volf’s mind. “I have a favor to ask of you, brother...”

“What is it, Volf? No need to be so reserved around me.”

“I’m hoping that maybe I could entrust the content of the future bookshelf to you were something to happen to me? Not that I have plans to disappear from the face of the world any time soon, but as they did with Dahlia’s father, these things may come unexpectedly.” If Volf were to suddenly kick the bucket like Carlo had, he wouldn’t want anybody to learn the secrets contained within his future bookshelf.

If servants learned the secret that he'd stashed away the books, it wouldn't matter—he'd be dead—so long as they didn't look. But *Dahlia* finding out he'd kept the pictures with no clothes? He'd die a dozen deaths were this disgrace to her disclosed.

"I understand. I'll register myself as well when it arrives, as usually it allows two people. If anything happens to you, I'll keep them with me or I'll destroy them for you," Guido pledged. Then, he lowered his voice. "I also have a request for you."

Volf tensed up. "What is it?"

"Remember how Jonas said I have a similar bookshelf? Well, he's registered to it too, but there is a nonzero chance that we might die together. Next time you come over to the main estate, I'd like to get you registered too and bequeath the contents to you in my will."

"Of course, brother." Whatever that content was needn't be explicitly explained, though Volf was secretly surprised to learn that Guido had some too.

"After hearing Madam Rossetti's story, I am sure I'd die a second time if one of my daughters found my hoard." His grievous words were nothing to laugh at; Volf didn't even have anything he could say, despite having thought the same thing. "You are free to keep whatever that you like, but you must absolutely not divulge that you got them from me. Switch out the bookshelf or something."

"Understood." The brothers had exchanged secrets, but there was no guilt attached. If anything, Volf felt closer to Guido.

They returned to work, flipping through the pages but finding no more notes. When they finished with one of the piles, the elder Scalfarotto started muttering again. "Seems like Madam Rossetti's father was on team behind."

If Volf had had a drink, he'd have spat it out. Instead, he swallowed and looked as unaroused as possible. But since there was no one else in the room and one may as well hang for a sheep as for a lamb, Volf pretended to be as nonchalant as he could. "May I ask you something completely unrelated?"

"Only if you answer the question first."

"Behinds."

Guido heaved a great sigh, if a bit exaggerated. “Shame.”

“Don’t tell me you’re on team breasts.”

“What do you mean by that? Four to one are for breasts.”

“No. I’d say people around me are closer to three to two for breasts.”

“I don’t know what company you keep, but your ratio is unbalanced.”

“Surely it’s yours that’s lopsided.” His figure was derived from a survey conducted when the Order of Beast Hunters had gone out drinking together, but Guido’s numbers must’ve been from the Mages’ Corps. Leaning so heavily on one side was suspect, but what reason was there to lie?

“Besides, team behinds is in cahoots with team hips and team legs. If your alliance is no more, then your numbers are even fewer.”

“In that case, for such a narrow focus such as breasts, your numbers surely cannot be so high.”

At that moment, in walked Jonas. “I have returned from ordering the—erm, did something happen?” His perfect timing meant that he caught the brothers grimacing at each other with the picture books on full display.

Panicking, Volf said, “Oh, we were just going through Mr. Rossetti’s books for any notes stuck between the pages!”

“Allow me to lend a hand.”

After Volf and Guido explained the thing about the notes again, the three of them sat side by side and once again began falling into the chaos of flipping through the pages. If it were him, Dorino, Randolph, and the other lads, the room would have been filled with conversation and jokes. But as it stood, the people beside him were people whom Volf deeply respected. Just what kind of expression or mood was he supposed to put on? “Sorry for troubling you, Master Jonas...”

“Not at all. This is a thousandfold better than reading a mountain of documents,” he answered in a chipper tone—the complete opposite of Volf. It seemed as though Jonas checked through his master’s paperwork; Guido made a sour face but otherwise kept silent.

Their hard work was evident in the pile of checked books at one corner of the table. Guido jogged the stack, commenting, “Judging by the amount of artwork featuring behinds, my guess is that Madam Rossetti’s father was on that team. Or perhaps he was for legs?”

“Right...” His brother was on the mark, but Volf wasn’t sure whether to confirm his suspicions.

“Shame. Not quite Lord Guido’s taste.” At least Jonas’s calm tone broke the tension. But Volf was curious about him too.

“Um, how about you, Master Jonas? Which do you prefer?”

“Neither, to be frank. I do not judge women by their breasts or behind.” An absolute gentleman. It put Volf to shame to have even discussed it in private with his brother.

“Of course. What do you look for in a woman then, Master Jonas?”

“I prefer those who have accumulated much experience.”

“Accumulated much experience?” Volf thought of Dahlia. The waterproof cloth, fairy glass spectacles, sköll bracelet, and now the magic-leeching bracelet—she had lots of skills and techniques accumulated within her; anguish at the thought that Dahlia might be Jonas’s type flooded Volf.

“Yes, they are usually more graceful and kind, and so they make for better conversation as well.” Jonas’s words demonstrated he was anything but shallow, and Volf respected him even more for that.

But Guido, sitting beside him, placed his hand on Volf’s shoulder and silently shook his head. “Years, Volf—Jonas is talking about experience from age. At least ten years older, and who knows if he has an upper bound.”

Guarantors and the New Employees

The westbound sun peeked through the windows, dyeing the room orange or maybe red. In that second-floor room of the Merchants' Guild that the Rossetti Trading Company was renting as an office, Dahlia and Ivano sat across from each other.

"Lord Gildo sure acts quickly..." she said.

"I'd say that's something I could learn from him if I didn't have objections about it as well..." On the desk separating the two of them, there were a letter and some documents from Marquis Gildovan Diels, the head treasurer of the royal castle.

Marcella had to step down as guarantor when he became an employee of the company. Gildo had offered to contact him if trouble arose, as Gildo felt indebted to Dahlia, and so they had sent him a letter to call upon him to fill that vacancy. Although they had asked for an audience with him only when convenient, he had responded the same day with his acknowledgement and said he would check his schedule. Dahlia and Ivano appreciated Gildo's promptness; that much was expected by now. However, they had not expected the following sequence of events.

The following evening, shortly after sending someone to the Guild to confirm that the Rossetti Trading Company had people in, Gildo and his attendant had swung by. However, Ivano had panicked, as he had been the only person present, so he had asked Gabriella to act as their witness. Signing the document had taken only moments, and within five minutes of becoming a guarantor, Gildo had left as quickly as he arrived. Afterwards, Ivano had sped to the Green Tower in a carriage—while the chairwoman had been absent, the marquis and head treasurer had visited in person, hadn't been served any refreshments, and had left without receiving a single thank-you gift. Dahlia had gone ghastly pale.

Earlier today, as she had been scratching her head about how to express her gratitude, Dahlia had returned to the guildhall to find that Ivano had gone

pallid. The cause? The letter in front of them. In addition to “contact me if trouble arises again,” Gildo had written that the very busy chairwoman need not take time out of her day to visit. The extremely polite writing had been typical of a nobleman like him, yet it had carried a deeper message: the chairwoman didn’t need to visit, but it wasn’t that *no one* needed to—with the Rossetti Trading Company only having two employees, Gildo had practically requested Ivano by name.

Ivano had choked down a double dose of medicine for the nausea that ensued, and Dahlia had poured him a glass of water. The two of them, dead inside, had stared off into the distance as their brainstorming session began. They had already given him zephyricloth scarves for their previous correspondence, so they decided this occasion had called for enough bolts of zephyricloth to make three dresses. Ivano had then asked a messenger to deliver a letter to Gildo saying that he would like to thank him in person soon.

This was around the time when Ivano would typically say he’d finish up just a little more paperwork, but he looked absolutely drained today. Dahlia asked, “It’s a little earlier than usual, Ivano, but shall we call it a day?”

“Good idea. We ought to pack up before Marquis Diels sends us another letter.” It was probably supposed to be a joke, but neither of them were laughing. Then, as if the world had a wicked sense of comedic timing, a knock came at the door. “No, it can’t be. Surely, that’s too early. Gods, please, don’t let it be him...”

Dread overflowed Dahlia’s face as she watched Ivano walk over to the entrance.

“Evening, Dahlia, Mr. Ivano. Sorry for dropping by unannounced, but do you think you have time to talk for a bit?”

“Apologies for bothering you during your work.”

On the other side of the door stood Marcella and a youth with brown hair. “Ah, Mr. Marcella and Mr. Grieve,” announced Ivano.

Mezzena Grieve wasn’t someone who showed up often; he was busy with his work at the Couriers’ Guild. In spite of that, Dahlia felt that she owed him greatly—on top of being a guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company, he was

one of the people who had helped her move back into the tower.

The two newcomers took a seat at the desk as well. “Did everything at the Couriers’ Guild turn out okay, Marcella?” She knew Marcella had planned to resign the day after Irma received the bracelet. He should have been wrapping things up at the Couriers’ already, and in a week, he would become a knight to the Scalfarotto household and an employee of the Rossetti Company. But since Mezzena came with him today, there must have been some kind of hiccup.

“That’s the thing...” Marcella began explaining. “I hate to drop this on you, but I was wonderin’ if you’ve got another opening for Mena—Mezzena, I mean. He knows everythin’ about my situation and we go way back, and so I can vouch for him.”

Talk about dropping her a bombshell. “Mr. Grieve, are you planning on resigning from the Couriers’ Guild?”

He responded, “That’s correct. In fact, I have talked to my manager today, and I will be leaving on the same day as Marcella.” Dahlia wondered if they were so inseparable that Mezzena would follow Marcella to his new workplace, but the apprehensive look on his face painted another picture. “You see, many people have asked me today about the marquis who will be replacing Marcella as the Rossetti Trading Company’s guarantor...”

“Let’s not downplay it. Rumors about me being headhunted by the Scalfarotto family left him unscathed, but Mena has been hounded by people in the guild and even while he’s on the job.”

“Oh, dear,” Ivano said. “It seems as though our company has played a part in Mr. Grieve’s troubles, wouldn’t you say, chairwoman?”

“Hm?” She didn’t have the slightest clue how the company had anything to do with Mezzena.

“Our guarantors were Viscount Jedda, guildmaster of the Merchants’; Sir Volf, son of Earl Scalfarotto; Mr. Marcella; and Mr. Mezzena Grieve. We shall be removing Mr. Marcella from that list, and yesterday, Marquis Diels personally offered to be his replacement. I’d call that conspicuous, and it’s no wonder that it has already become a topic of discussion around town,” Ivano explained. “I apologize, Mr. Grieve; I meant to talk to you soon about this matter, but the

pace of everything has caught me by surprise...”

Without Marcella, everybody aside from Mezzena on that list were noblemen—very high-ranking noblemen at that. Now it made sense to Dahlia why he would have the spotlight pointed at him. “Mr. Grieve, could you tell me what they said to you?”

“Well, they asked me for referrals for business and, erm, personal reasons regarding you, Ms. Rossetti. It has been quite overbearing, and so I’ve decided to search for a new job. The problem is that I have no family, and if I ask Marcella to be my—”

“No, this was my fault to begin with,” he interrupted. “Dahlia, if it’s going to be any trouble to you at all, of course we’ll look elsewhere. Gods know how much trouble I’ve caused you already.”

Tracing where the trouble came from, Dahlia landed at herself, the chairwoman of the Rossetti Company. “Ivano, could we please hire Mr. Grieve? It really is our fault he’s caught up in this.”

“I wouldn’t even need to be a full-time employee; I’d be more than happy helping out wherever I could, like as a courier, or a driver, or at whatever odd jobs you might have. Anything helps,” Mezzena said, diffident and reluctant to impose.

Ivano smiled. “Of course. The only way I see for us to help with your predicament is to hire you as an employee. If you can give us a few days, we’ll work out the details. And forgive me for being rude—I understand you said you do not have family, but would you happen to have any relative who could be your personal guarantor?”

“I grew up in a state institution, so I don’t have any sort of relatives. There was an elderly woman who I called my grandma and got my last name from, but she has already passed away...”

“I understand. Very well, Mr. Grieve, I’ll have you start on the same day as Mr. Marcella, then. And Mr. Marcella, may I put you down as his personal guarantor?”

“Of course, and thank you, Ivano. Trust me, I ain’t gonna let him cause no

trouble—erm, I mean, I shall be answerable for his actions.”

“Thank you very much!” Mezzena bowed as deeply as he could. The two friends—more like brothers—then clasped hands as they shared a big smile.

“Aren’t you glad, chairwoman? Starting next week, we’ll have twice the number of people to share our worries.”

“I really am glad, actually.” Despite laughing at Ivano’s words and understanding that more heads didn’t automatically mean their troubles will go away, Dahlia was genuinely happy.

For now, Marcella and Mezzena looked quizzically at them, but the new hires would understand well enough in a week’s time.

Crystal-Roasted Sweet Potatoes and Silversabers

“Sweeeeet potatoes! Get your taste of autumn here!” From outside the Green Tower’s windows came the distinct call of a hawker. A parallel to Dahlia’s previous life, though it was a splendid boy soprano singing his song here.

Dahlia grabbed her wallet and a dish before finding a tiny food cart on one wheel by her door. “Hello, two, please.”

“Thank you, miss!” The boy’s smile was as sweet as the potatoes he was selling.

In Ordine, small pushcarts like these would come by with flowers and vegetables in the spring, fruits in the summer, and chestnuts and sweet potatoes in the fall and winter. The peddlers were usually schoolchildren pitching in for their families or earning money for their tuition. Incidentally, the customer’s age never mattered; they were addressed as “miss” if their outfit seemed to be feminine. And if that didn’t fit the bill, the customer could make a correction and the peddler would remember to use the right term of address forever. As an older lady had once put it to Dahlia, the secret to feeling good about yourself was to patronize these food carts.

“Here you are, miss! And a bonus for you because you’re so pretty!”

Dahlia got two extra sweet potatoes on her dish, though they were a little smaller and slightly charred. Though he was half her age, the boy’s flattery still managed to get a smile from Dahlia. What a natural salesman. “Thank you. And since you’re working so hard, mister, here’s a little tip for you.” Peddling was no easy task and he was trying his darndest, so he deserved a few more coppers for his effort.

“Thank you again!” he bellowed, making her flinch. The air magic in the boy meant he needed no magical tool to amplify his voice, and working his powers lured out the neighborhood’s housewives with their plates.

Dahlia smiled and said goodbye as she headed back inside. What a natural

salesman indeed.

Though the sweet potatoes in the Kingdom of Ordine were just as purple on the outside, they weren't quite as sweet on the inside as the ones in Japan. The sweetness of these fire crystal-roasted tubers came in the form of honey butter that came with every purchase. Dahlia, too, had two white paper packages of the stuff by the side of her dish. It was a guilty pleasure available every fall in the city center. And if you didn't have enough of the compound butter, you could always do the devilish deed of ordering more from the stalls.

"I'm sharing with Volf, so I'm fine," Dahlia reasoned with herself, the temptation of indulging herself winning over the worries about her waistline creeping up. "I *should* be fine, right...?"

It wasn't long before the bell rang, then after a brief pause, another time—Volf's leitmotif. (Without the pause in between, that would be Irma.) It had been a while since he came by; he had to make up for the training he missed out on during the crafting of the magic-leeching bracelet, and then the appearance of a red bear on the highway meant an expedition. After greeting him and sharing a smile, the two of them went up to the second floor.

"Sorry for dozing off on you the other time, Volf, and, um, thank you for the jacket."

"You're welcome, and don't be sorry—you were exhausted. More importantly, you didn't roll off the couch, did you?"

Dahlia was ever so slightly bashful as she handed Volf the jacket, but it didn't seem as though he was bothered one bit; he must have lent his jacket out to his squadmates too, she reckoned. "With the armchairs around me, of course not."

"Good to hear. Oh, here," he said, opening up a paper bag for her to see, "I got these on the way in."

Now she had six sweet potatoes. Dahlia figured it would be better to tell a white lie and quietly tuck the ones she'd bought earlier in the fridge; making a dessert out of the leftovers wouldn't be a bad idea. "Thank you so much! I think milk tea would go better with these than just plain." She had an odd sense of self-satisfaction about the fact that they'd both bought the same thing.

With a strong pot of tea and milk on the side, the two of them began digging in. Dahlia snapped one potato in half; steam drifted up from the still-warm treat. The toasted skin separated easily from the bright golden flesh, which was tender from the thorough cooking. When Volf took a big chomp out of his, Dahlia felt much less reserved about doing the same. Still, she tried her best to take smaller, more polite bites than usual, and the rustic sweetness and creaminess were just as enjoyable.

About halfway through, Volf opened the small package and drizzled the melted honey butter onto his sweet potato. Dahlia watched with suspicion—he wasn't a huge fan of anything too sugary, yet he wasn't holding back—and her thoughts must've been obvious. Volf smiled, saying, "It was a favorite of my mother's. When the weather started getting cold, she'd pick up some for me, keeping it a secret from the other knights."

"It seems she really loved you."

"Maybe. Haven't really thought about that, though..."

Volf trailed off as if memories were coming back to him, so Dahlia decided to change topics. "Was the red bear a difficult foe?" She recalled him mentioning he had grappled and thrown one once.

"I didn't get a chance at it, actually. The mages really gave it their all, encasing the red bear in ice and finishing the job without a fight. We loaded the whole thing and took it home to butcher or something. Just in case, though, we did camp for a night to see whether there was anything else that would show up, but unfortunately..."

"I would've assumed that was a good thing."

"Well, we all brought our camp stoves, right? Of course we had our hopes up to grill a red bear. And if not, then we were at least hoping to make some boar or game bird stew. But nothing." With how each and every knight of the Order of Beast Hunters seemed to exude apex predator energy, Dahlia wondered if the powerful monsters and animals wouldn't simply run away for fear of being eaten. "In the end, we foraged some mushrooms, then sautéed them with some butter to accompany the meat that we brought to grill. Oh, and the boys were absolutely ecstatic about your sauce, telling me to thank you for them."

“Oh, I’m so glad they liked it. Is there still enough for everyone?”

“We’re, uh, running a little low.”

She had made two kinds of barbecue sauce, enough to fill a pair of medium kegs, but the grown men worked hard and ate lots, and it seemed it wasn’t enough. “If you’re almost out after just one expedition, then I ought to place an order at a professional kitchen to send you a big barrel.”

“Vice-Captain Griswald said he’s more than happy to pay for your recipe and keep it under lock and key too.”

“Oh, I’m always on the receiving end of things, like with the forest serpent. Besides, it isn’t like it’s some sort of secret. Irma, my father’s friends, our neighbors, and the like all know the recipe too, so feel free to use it to your heart’s content. I’ll jot it down for you later.”

“Thanks. I think you prevented a full-scale war just now.”

She chuckled. *The Beast Hunters’ Battle for Barbecue Sauce? That might just be a fun watch.* “I’m happy that no one got hurt on the expedition too.”

“Well, the alcohol did some damage to us.”

“I thought healing magic was effective on hangovers.”

“It was the priest and a mage who were hit the hardest—they *really* enjoyed their cheese fondue with estervino and grilled dried kraken with more drink...” Estervino wasn’t such a common drink either, so they might have chugged it like wine. Still, none of that sounded like proper behavior during an expedition. “The priest couldn’t focus well enough to use his magic, but because he had a splitting headache, he tried to fix himself first. Ended up collapsing on the ground.”

“And he had to be carted back?”

“Nah. Once the vice moaned about how he’d have to find others to join us for our expedition next time, the mage somehow pulled it together and healed himself, then the priest and everyone else,” Volf said, to Dahlia’s relief. There was probably some sort of ego involved in that, what with the threat of being replaced. Of course, getting so drunk as to be hungover was on them, but

Dahlia couldn't help but feel a little guilty for her recipes too.

Right after they satisfied themselves with the roasted sweet potatoes and honey butter, Volf had his mind on dinner already. "Anyway, Dahlia, do you wanna go out for dinner tonight? I'm always putting you through so much trouble when I come over."

"Um, well, I actually have everything prepared, and it won't keep very well..." She felt bad declining his invitation, but she had another autumn delicacy ready. That caught Volf's curiosity, and so they both went to the kitchen and she opened up a box. Inside were four silvery fish, long and straight, packed with an ice crystal, peddled by the fishmongers today. "They're nice and oily, so I was thinking of bringing them up to the rooftop to grill."

"Are those perhaps silversabers?"

"That's right, but we common folk tend to just call them sauries. Do you like silversabers, Volf?"

"I don't think I've had them since I was a kid..."

It was unusual for him to be so apprehensive about food, especially given how he loved dried seafood. Then it clicked for Dahlia—saury was one name for the fish; another was slumfish. In the fall, they were fatty—if not outright greasy—and widely available in Ordine. She could see why it would give him pause. "If they aren't to your taste, I have some dried seafood we could grill too."

"Oh, no, that's not it. I had it as a kid with my mother, but I ate too much, and since there was so much fat in the fish, my stomach couldn't really handle it. At the time, she joked about how the silversabers were still rattling around inside me, and I guess I took it to heart and I never touched the stuff again. Now that I say it out loud, I realize just how silly I am, huh?"

"Children are like that; they scare easily." But the truth was that Dahlia couldn't fathom why Volf's mother had said something like that. She had been mischievous maybe, but look at the trauma left on him. Poor Volf. Dahlia nodded to herself, then brought a bottle of brown spirits from her kitchen cupboard. "But you're an adult now, so how about giving it another shot?"

His golden eyes flickered to the amber liquid, and then the man smiled.

“Yeah, I think I will.”

The skies felt a little more within reach up here. With cushions and plates on top of the layer of waterproof cloth, the Green Tower’s rooftop diner was open for business. The wind was still, meaning the throw blankets wouldn’t see any action just yet. Dahlia set down a pair of compact magical stoves, brought them up to temperature, then began grilling the lightly salted sauries, which were a bit big for the grill grates. Perhaps it was a trick of the eye, but the silver glimmer of the fish looked brighter than the ones she had known in her previous world.

In that life, sauries had been a favorite of Dahlia’s father, but her mother had hated the mess in the kitchen that came afterwards, so the three of them had frequently gone out for saury dinners as a compromise. Scenes of those autumn nights were as hazy as if she were looking through thin cloth, but the laughter, joy, and meals they had shared were eternal.

“Could you please juice these for me, Volf?” she asked. He took the halved lemons into his hands and wrung them out over a cup with a spout; he and his strengthening spell made short work of the task. Then, into their glasses, Dahlia added ice, a glug of the liquor, a good amount of water, and topped them with a heavy splash of the lemon juice.

“Not the usual whisky soda with lemon, I see.” He seemed intrigued by the substitution of water for carbonated water.

“That’s right. I think estervino pairs very well with silversaber, but my father loved it like this better. ‘Saury goes well not with bubbles but with extra lemon,’ he said.”

“Huh, so it’s something your father was picky about.”

“Mm-hmm. But, you know, to each their own. If you like soda, I could do that instead for you. Or when you don’t want to get drunk or if it’s for someone who can’t handle their drink, lemon water with some ice and a few drops of liquor on top for flavor is also a good choice.” Dahlia omitted the name of said lightweight, but it was the go-to of her good friend Lucia.

As they chatted, the oil began to spatter and smoke rose from the heat. It was

plain to see that the ferocious scent of the saury had Volf on the edge of his seat. Dahlia flipped the fatty fish, and the oil that had rendered out trickled onto the heat, resulting in a delightful sizzle. Then, they were ready.

“There’s salt, fish sauce, grated radish, chili powder, lemon, and ginger at your disposal. Feel free to use whichever you like,” she said. The sight of all the seasoning and condiments had Volf sitting up straight. Sadly, Dahlia had seen neither sudachi nor kabosu—two sharp citruses from Japan that were nearly a must-have to accompany fish—in this world.

The saury, barely fitting Dahlia’s long rectangular plate, was seared to a nice golden brown. With a pair of chopsticks, she took some of the flesh from the back with its crisped skin still attached and brought it to her mouth. Of course, it was piping hot, as it had just come off the grill, and her impatience scalded her. But once the intensity of the heat faded, she was rewarded with the robust flavor of the fish, then the sweetness of the fat and the smoky charred skin—autumnal bliss in a bite. She looked over at her dining companion to gauge his opinion, and good was the verdict—his eyes were closed and the corners of his mouth were upturned, as he was absorbed in chewing his food; Dahlia decided to keep quiet so as not to interrupt his moment. When he finally swallowed his bite, he followed up with a drink of his whisky and branch with lemon, then let out a very satisfied sigh.

When he finally noticed her, Volf made his smile even bigger, his mouth glistening with grease. “Dahlia, this is amazing...” He turned his gaze—tender and yearning, like a boy in love—back at the saury; how many people would fall for him if he were to use that look on not food but people? Though the dorsal side was easy to work apart, the flesh near the belly wasn’t and had many small bones, and Volf struggled with his fish as Dahlia deftly split hers with chopsticks. “Is there some sort of trick to this?”

“What I like to do is to work my chopsticks into the spine, eat the side facing me, and take out the bones. Then I eat the rest,” she explained, not bothering to stop with her meal. Volf followed her instructions but couldn’t quite figure it out, so she borrowed his chopsticks and helped him out.

“You’re really good at this, Dahlia.”

“Once you get more practice, I’m sure you’ll catch up in no time.” She then took a bite of the organs. Having them with the condiments made them a delicacy with much complexity. The bitterness was mild, leaving the flavor of brine and fish to shine through—a good sign that the saury was very fresh.

“Are you supposed to eat every part of the silversaber like that?”

“It’s an acquired taste, but I think the organs are quite good too at this time of the year.”

Trying a very small piece of it was enough to crease his brow. “That’s a bit bitter...”

“You might like it better having some grated radish and a squeeze of lemon in the same bite. Then, take a swig of your drink. My father said it’s something for grown-ups, and even then, I don’t think many adults actually like it. Please don’t feel like you have to force yourself to enjoy it.”

Volf added the suggested condiments and braved a second try, and then even a third try with some chili powder on top. “Hm. I get it now. Yeah, that’s pretty good. So, that’s what something for grown-ups tastes like...” He seemed like he’d reached a comprehensive understanding of the silversaber.

“I’m glad you acquired a taste for it too.”

“I mean, ‘silversaber’ is pretty obvious, but I wonder why it would be denigrated as ‘slumfish.’ With how good it tastes, maybe they should call it ‘silverfish.’ Or better yet, ‘goldfish?’”

Dahlia would rather not call it the name of those beautiful ornamental fish from her previous life, let alone imagining them flopping around on the grill. “Silversabers are quite fatty, so maybe they’re not to the taste of nobles, since they don’t move around as much. Maybe you knights who are very physically active and young people who don’t mind more fat to their meat enjoy it more?”

“Yeah, maybe the other knights would be happy to have something like this on expeditions.”

“I don’t think it would be very feasible to pack them with you. Silversabers spoil quickly unless you can keep them refrigerated.”

“What if we got the mages to keep them cold while we travel?” Whenever Volf got into a particular ingredient or dish, he was bound to spread it to everyone else. He might not be conscious of it, but he’d try to get everyone else to try it too—his squad, everyone in the castle, Guido, even Jonas. He was quite the natural salesman too.

“Volf, why do you need to bring sauries on your missions so badly?”

He broke into a grin and said, “Morale.” *His morale.*

Nothing but sauries would indeed be too heavy, and so, next on the menu was corn—bright yellow and grilled on the stove. Dahlia had parboiled the corn before rubbing them down with butter and salt. She would’ve preferred to season them with soy sauce, but she made do by heating up fish sauce to dampen some of the funk and then adding a bit of sugar. She brushed that mixture onto the three ears on the grill. The corn in Ordine had big kernels—about one-and-a-half-times as big as the ones she had had in Japan. The hull was also a bit stiffer here, though they were plenty sweet and had a great snap. As they were partially cooked already, it didn’t take long for them to be ready.

Seeing the charred corn on his plate, Volf quizzically tilted his head to one side. Nobles were probably too pompous to eat corn on the cob if they ate corn at all—it was supposedly considered a peasant food. But corn chowder was sometimes on the menu of fancy-schmancy restaurants, so wasn’t that a little hypocritical?

“I, um, hope you don’t mind going to town on it,” Dahlia said.

“How exactly do you mean?”

“You probably won’t want to do this in polite company, but like this.” She grabbed the ear of corn at both ends and sank her teeth in.

“I see. You really *are* going to town on it.”

“Nrgk! Uh, a-a knife! You can use a knife if you’d like, Volf!”

As embarrassed as she was to have demonstrated, her student wasn’t, and he did just as she had. And then he paused with eyes wide. “So sweet...”

After that, Volf gave it his undivided attention. The way he was like a little boy discovering the food for the first time was a little endearing, but it'd be rude to say that out loud, so Dahlia continued eating her ear of corn too. Its sweetness complemented the savory sauce glazed on top.

This time, it was Volf's turn to watch her relishing her food. To be more precise, he was looking at her corn. "How do you eat it so cleanly, Dahlia?"

"I put my bottom teeth in between the rows, like this."

"Oh, you're so clever, Dahlia. Lemme try too." He wedged his pearly whites in the gap between the kernels, carefully plucking them up and out; Dahlia couldn't stifle her smile. When Volf cleanly cleared out three rows, he looked down at the cob with much satisfaction. Dahlia couldn't keep count of how many times she'd corrupted this nobleman with such vulgarity, but it was already too late to try to correct the course.

When Volf grabbed his second ear, Dahlia restarted the compact magical stove. "I'll grill some more saury next."

"Thank you," he said. "I'm treated to something scrumptious every time I come over. Are you sure you're not trying to tame me?"

"I'm not trying to make you my pet, if that's what you're asking."

"Maybe I keep returning to the Green Tower because I've been tamed by your delicious meals already..."

"Well, so that you'll keep coming home from your expeditions safe and sound, I'll have to make you more delicious meals," offered Dahlia. She placed some more fish on the grill to the soundtrack of his laughter.

"The wind's picking up a little," Volf said. "Oh, hey, the moon." As they were catching their breath after the meal, the sun just sank below the horizon, while in the east, the large full moon came into view.

Dahlia dimmed the magical lantern that she had turned on earlier, and the two looked up into the night sky. "I guess it has become a moon-viewing night."

"Seems like it," Volf agreed, eclipsing the moon with his glass as he swirled it.

While he enjoyed the amber up above, she finished off the amber in her hand. Her drink was mixed stronger than it had been during dinner, warming her up as it passed down her throat. They chatted as they indulged in the view.

When the conversation came to a lull, Volf set down his empty glass. As he was about to refill it, there was a terribly pained expression on his face that turned to a cold smile and then disappeared altogether.

“Volf?”

He paused. “It’s nothing. Just thinking about something stupid.”

“If you ever want to talk, I’m always here to listen.” She snatched the bottle out of his hands and filled his glass with a splash of the amber.

Volf stared down his glass as words began trickling out from him. “My hair is the same color as my mother’s, but what about my fool’s gold eyes? Who do they come from? My mother’s were dark brown, while my brother and father have blue eyes. They’re not from my grandparents either. In fact, I’ve never met a relative with the same color eyes as me.”

“Maybe it was passed down through your ancestors on your mother’s side.”

“Maybe. But maybe my father hated her and had—”

“The alcohol’s getting to you, Volf,” she said, cutting him short. But her plans only got her so far; Dahlia scrambled to find something else to say. “Erm, it sounds like your mother was a gallant knight. And your father fell in love with her at first sight, was it? So I don’t think you should keep going down that line of thought. I could only imagine how tough it must be to be suspected by your own child, or at least it would be for me...”

“Thanks, Dahlia. I’m a bad drunk. Forget what I said.” He sounded as though he had calmed down, and for a brief moment, he looked like Guido.

“Besides, you’re quite like your older brother.”

“Am I?” Apparently it wasn’t something he’d heard often.

“I think so. The way you two knit your brows when you worry, the way you laugh, even the way you jump from topic to topic—I never know what comes next, like cranking a jack-in-the-box. I’m sure there’s a lot more if I think about

it,” Dahlia said. “Oh! You two have similar tastes in food and drinks.”

“Huh. I guess so...”

“My father and I were the same way. We didn’t look very much alike, but there were many other areas where we were alike.”

“Is that right?” Volf slowly nodded before breaking into a smile. “In that case, I’m confident that my brother would love grilled silversabers too.”

“Please do not grill them indoors. I beg of you.”

It turned out it was a wish that would not be granted. Along with compact magical stoves, the Scalfarotto household would place a large order of degreaser and detergent with the Rossetti Trading Company in about two weeks’ time.

The New Guarantor and the Kit

“Thank you very much for this opportunity, and may our cooperation be enduring.”

“Likewise. May our cooperation be lasting.”

In the drawing room of the magical tool shop named The Goddess’s Right Eye, Oswald and Dahlia donned spotless white gloves and exchanged red-trimmed parchments. Flanking Oswald were his son Raulaere and his second wife Fiore, while beside Dahlia was Ivano.

“Professor Oswald, thank you very much for obliging such a sudden proposal. We really appreciate your help.”

“I am just as grateful to have the chance to be a guarantor to such an accomplished chairwoman.”

With first Marcella and now Mezzena unable to remain as guarantors, the Rossetti Trading Company had had to find a new one yet again. Ivano had recommended the guildmaster of the Tailors’ and head of the Viscounty Luini, Fortunato. However, ever since Dahlia told him “You have my trust, Mr. Fortunato. I leave everything to you”—a line from an old opera that meant she considered him worthy of being her knight as well as an allusion that was later used when a noblewoman spent the night with a man for the first time—Dahlia had dreaded the language of the nobility and would much rather not have asked Fortunato for his help, even if he might have forgotten the incident by now.

And so, Dahlia had gone to her fellow chairperson Oswald for advice, and he had suggested that they each become a guarantor of the other’s company. The Zola Company had many guarantors, but most of them were even older than Oswald, and so, although Dahlia’s lack of experience made her feel inadequate for the role, he had requested that she take it on in the hopes that there would be someone still around when his son Raul became a toolmaker and took over the family business.

Raul rose from his seat, walked around the table, and approached Dahlia. “I look forward to working with you in the future as well, Ms. Dahlia,” he said with a big smile. His silver hair and eyes made him look as though Oswald had rewound time and become a boy. He was also a head shorter than Dahlia, and his cute, short stature almost made her wish she had a younger brother like him.

“Likewise, Master Raul.”

When she returned his smile with her own, Raul extended his right hand—to shake hands, so Dahlia thought as she reached her hand out to meet his. However, the grade schooler dropped to one knee and brought her hand to his mouth. She still had on a pair of gloves; whether he actually pressed his lips to the back of her hand remained a mystery, but it was enough to make her freeze up completely. “May our relationship be everlasting.”

Dahlia tried her best to reboot herself. It was to be expected that Raul would have some education in noble ways, considering Oswald was from a viscounty and was bound to be a viscount next year as well. This was just a regular, everyday, normal noble greeting and there was nothing weird about it, so she told herself. “Y-Yes, of course, Master Raul.”

“As I am but a fledgling in magical toolmaking, please call me by just my first name.”

“I, um...” She hesitated. Raul was the son of Baron Oswald, a man who was always helping her out, while Dahlia was a student of Oswald’s who had yet to earn any title; she really did not know if it was correct for her to address Raul in such a familiar and casual way.

Oswald reassured her, saying, “You have my blessing, Dahlia. Both of you are my students, so it is only natural that you should become close. Though Raulaere may be younger than you, he may be helpful to you in the future should he become a proficient toolmaker as well.”

“Thank you very much, Professor,” she said. “In that case, Raul, please call me Dahlia as well.”

Raul’s sheepish grin was much louder than his whispering. “Very well then, Dahlia.” Though he had a younger brother, he didn’t have an older sibling, and

perhaps it was the prospect of having an older friend that made him so happy.

“While I still have you here, Chairwoman Rossetti, I would like to make an announcement and a request,” Oswald said. Being suddenly addressed as *chairwoman* made her sit bolt upright. “Today, my wife Fiore has become the vice-chairwoman of the Zola Company, and from now on, she shall be managing the business operations.”

The aura surrounding her seemed gentler than before, yet at the same time, flashier and more gorgeous. Her lipstick was a little more vivid than usual and her scarlet dress shouted vice-chairwoman. “My name is Fiore Zola. I look forward to working with you in the future.” The woman with red hair and soft green eyes gave a great smile. The corners of her eyes gave away her age, but it didn’t change how cute she was. She seemed like someone who Dahlia could consult without any reservation.

It was only then that Dahlia realized she had never heard the name of the Zola Company’s vice-chairperson until now. Ivano must’ve had the same thought, as he turned ponderously toward Oswald. “Forgive my impoliteness, Professor Oswald, but I don’t believe I ever met your previous vice-chairperson.”

“My father-in-law used to sit in this position informally, but he chastised me the other day for not making my wife take over, as he is getting up there, despite only being ten or so years older than I am...” Oswald’s smile looked forced. It seemed as though he had a hard time dealing with his father-in-law. Fiore’s smile was as delicate as ever.

The businesspeople chatted among themselves until they were interrupted by a quiet voice calling out. “Um, father?” Raul had returned to his seat already and was looking at Oswald with anxious, silver eyes.

“What is the matter, Raulaere?”

“Father...” He hesitated before continuing. “You aren’t unwell, are you?”

“I am healthy as a horse, but what prompted you to ask me in front of our guests?”

“I’m sorry.” It was understandable that he would be worried for his father but

equally understandable that his father would scold him for bringing it up in public.

Still, Dahlia couldn't help but feel some sort of pity for the child. "Professor Oswald! Um, even children worry about their parents..." she blurted out, her tone inadvertently condescending. She kicked herself for not thinking more before she spoke.

Oswald placed his hand on his chin and pondered for a few moments. "That was wrong of me. I keep preaching about the importance of communication, yet I chose to focus on keeping up appearances instead. If you could excuse me, Chairwoman Rossetti and Ivano, allow me to fix this mistake." He stood up and faced his son, who in turn looked back with eyes wide, bewildered. "The reason I have asked Fiore to help with the company is that I want to spend more time on magical toolmaking and, more importantly, on teaching my son to become a proper toolmaker." He softly placed his hand—the hand of a master and the hand of a father—on the boy's head.

Raul may have blushed, but he did not stop Oswald from ruffling his hair. "Thank you, father! I'll give it my all as well!"

"Do that, my son."

The boy turned to Dahlia, who was looking on with a warm smile. "Dahlia, I'll catch up to you in no time!"

"And I'll give it my all so that you won't," she said, her fervor renewed.

Oswald and Fiore looked very pleased to see the fellow students vow diligence. "I have no doubts the two of them will see big improvements before long," she said.

"Yes," her husband agreed, "and I hope they will never stop improving."

Despite the joviality around him, Ivano pressed his fingers against his temple in an attempt to ease the aching in his head—Dahlia seemingly had no clue about the zeal in the boy's eyes. Ivano muttered under his breath, "Only a kit. Still a silver fox."



On their carriage ride home, Dahlia turned away from the window and toward him. “Oh, Ivano, moving forward, I think you ought to become the vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company. Let’s get the paperwork done when we return to the guild.”

“Excuse me?!” he shrieked at the top of his lungs. No preamble, no confirmation—it was not a request but an order, plain and simple. “Hold your horses, chairwoman! What are you going on about all of a sudden?”

“I’ve actually been thinking about it for a while now, but since the professor brought it up earlier, I thought I might do the same soon.”

“Chairwoman,” he asked in a panic, “you aren’t unwell, are you?”

“Fit as a fiddle, I assure you. But our company has four members now, you know? If anything happens to me, things will get messy.”

Ivano reckoned her casual tone meant that she had no idea what were the rights of a vice-chair or what appointing a successor entailed. It was a terrible idea to put him down in both those positions. It would be a misstep to essentially sign the entire company to him—he would easily be able to do so if he wished. Ivano said through gritted teeth, “A vice-chairperson holds a lot of power, and likewise for your successor. They will have access to the company funds, so ordinarily, this is something a chairperson would ask of a family member or someone they trust as—”

Dahlia interrupted him. “We might not be related, but I trust you, Ivano. Is that not good enough?”

He was stunned by her bluntness. Flattering, sure, but she needed to understand what she was getting into. “I believe you understand the rights of a vice-chair and what appointing a successor entails?”

“Yes, I think I do. I have read up about it and asked the Merchants’ Guild as well.”

“Then you understand—and forgive the way it sounds—that if anything were to happen to you, I would succeed you as the vice-chairman and essentially have the Rossetti Trading Company, including its assets and the rights to the magical tools, all in my hands?”

“Right. If anything happens to me, you *have* to take over the company, Ivano. Think of the livelihoods of our employees and the people depending on our products.” Her green eyes looked as though she were questioning why Ivano had asked the obvious.

He froze again. “I *have* to take over the company?”

“Well, it’s not as though I have any family or apprentices, so if the need arises, you’ll have to decide whether the company keeps running or folds, how to protect our employees, and whatnot. I need you to be my vice-chairman because the Rossetti Trading Company needs to be prepared.” It was evidently a matter of fact for Dahlia. Her eyes were a brighter shade of green than usual, yet beneath it was a hint of murkiness.

“Did something bother you earlier at Professor Oswald’s, chairwoman?”

“Not exactly. Buuuut if there’s an emergency and the company shuts down, our employees and their families will be affected. And they say one’s company is one’s second family, so I just want to be ready for anything,” Dahlia said, probably thinking of Raul.

It was true that the company was a second family—in fact, that was what Ivano had taught her. But someone like Dahlia, who had already lost her entire family, must’ve wanted to protect everyone else close to her—likely even himself, Raul, and Marcella’s family too. Or perhaps it was because Oswald was training his son to succeed him that Dahlia had death on her mind. Whatever the case may have been, Dahlia was far too young to be worrying about this sort of thing. Instead, Ivano wanted to grant the redheaded proprietress the most freedom he could afford her—freedom to create whatever magical tools she wanted, to continue working in a way that fulfilled her. That was why he was an employee.

“I don’t think you need to be worrying about that, Ms. Dahlia,” he said. “In the one-in-a-thousand—no, one-in-a-million chance that something like that were to happen, I’m sure I could maneuver the company, and I could always ask Madam Gab—”

“Even if I am still the chairwoman on paper? And don’t forget that Gabriella is the vice-master of the Merchants’ Guild and that she is not affiliated with the

Rossetti Company. If the time comes and the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company can't protect the employees who so diligently help and work for us and instead has to rely on the Merchants' Guild, how irresponsible and embarrassing would that be for me?"

"Embarrassing, you say?"

"That's right. I wouldn't want to go in such an embarrassing way, that's for sure. And the only way to prevent my reputation from getting tarnished like that is to have a vice-chairman and successor. That's why I'm asking you, Ivano." She was as resolute as if she'd died before and come back. As much as he wanted to laugh, he couldn't.

"I know your heart's in magical toolmaking—there's no need to break it for the sake of the company," Ivano had once said to Dahlia. She had become a chairwoman despite her lack of familiarity with commerce. She wore her heart on her sleeve and wasn't suited for bargaining with others. That was why he was there to deal with the business, both in plain sight and in the shadows, and all he had to do was keep Dahlia in mind—or at least that was what Ivano had thought. As chairwoman, she had begun extending her arms to protect her employees—not because she'd been taught to do so, but because she was figuring out how to be a chairwoman on her own. Ivano, failing to realize that, had almost become an "embarrassing" subordinate.

"It seems as though I have been underestimating you—thinking of you as some girl who needed someone to guide her along. I now see that you are not only a fully-fledged magical toolmaker but a fully-fledged chairperson as well..."

"Ivano?" She seemed weirded out by his mumbling.

"Very well. I humbly accept the role of being your vice-chairman and successor, at least until you have family to call your own."

"I might take on an apprentice one day, but I have no plans on starting a family or removing you from the role, Ivano. If anything happens to me, you'll be the chairman and you can have my apprentice as your vice-chairperson."

Ivano chose to let it go, despite wanting to say something; he would cross that bridge if he came to it. "Understood."

Dahlia had already become a true chairperson. He could give his direction, but she didn't need his correction. He could give her words of caution, but she didn't need his protection. It was not a question of who was standing in front of whom; it was only a matter of standing side by side for the sake of the Rossetti Trading Company.

"Chairwoman, how about we host a get-together soon? It would be a great way to have the new employees meet the craftspeople, like Fermo and Ms. Lucia," explained Ivano. Celebrating the new start of the Rossetti Company with just four people would make it a bit lifeless, but add a few affable friends to that mix and there was a lively party to be had.

"That's a great idea! Oh, um, would it be okay if I invited Volf too?"

"Of course. If anything, I'd be angry if you didn't invite Sir Volf." His words caused a warm smile to blossom on Dahlia's face. Ivano was her partner in business, not in life. And though she was so sure that she had no plans to start a family of her own, he wondered when she would realize there was already someone who she treated like family. Ivano decided to keep his nosiness to himself and instead prayed silently—*may she realize it soon, and before that silver kit grows up.*

The Newcomers' Meeting

"Are you sure you're all right, Marcella?"

"Of course, chairwoman," he answered, "though I must say I don't know how long I can keep this up." His face was stiff as a board despite his words.

Seeing him like that, even Dahlia couldn't keep it up. "Ugh, it just doesn't feel right when we act so businesslike around each other."

"Course not, Dahlia! But imagine if I were talkin' to you like this in front of company!"

"He's got a point, chairwoman!" quipped Ivano.

Inside their room in the Merchants' guildhall, the members of the Rossetti Company had met up to practice proper etiquette. Dahlia sat beside Ivano, across the desk from Marcella and Mezzena. Ivano was the only one infallible in his behavior, and so the two newcomers needed tutelage, but just getting down speech, bowing, and formal introductions was beyond difficult. Currently, due to a chain reaction, Dahlia and Marcella had both failed, while Mezzena was trying his best to keep from laughing out loud.

Ivano continued, "Please try a little harder, chairwoman. You must understand that at work, *Sir Marcella* is your subordinate."

"May I implore you to refrain from addressing me as such, *vice-chairman*? It makes my skin crawl."

"If I may be so honest, Marcella, the same goes for me."

Both men squirmed and shivered at having their titles emphasized like that, something that was almost nostalgic for Dahlia. "Now you two will understand how I used to feel being called chairwoman," she said with a smirk.

That was the breaking point for Mezzena. "Thank goodness I'm a nobody, eh, sir knight, vice-chairman?"

"Oh, I'll get you back for this, Mena..."

“Remember what we’ve been practicing, Marcella,” said Ivano. Though they didn’t quite stick the landing, the four of them had finally finished the session and they all heaved a sigh of relief. “Now, let’s move on to some procedures we have to get through. As the two of you have stepped down as guarantors, you are entitled to a share of the profits made during the period. I have already deposited the money into each of your accounts at the guild, and here is the receipt.”

When Marcella and Mezzena became guarantors, they had each put in four gold toward the founding of the company. Now, they were refunded their deposit and a share of the profits on top of it. But when the newcomers read their receipt, both of them froze up.

“Erm, vice-chairman, is this sum correct?”

“I have checked my math, Marcella. There is no mistake,” Ivano said as nonchalantly as possible. Written on the receipt was the initial four gold plus another twenty—a sum of twenty-four.

“Six hundred percent in a mere four months...? Was this some sort of high-stakes bet...?” Mezzena’s aqua eyes were fixed on the piece of paper; whether he was shocked or moved was not yet apparent. But it was only natural that they were so surprised. She was too—it was the equivalent of putting in four hundred thousand yen and getting nearly two and a half million back.

“It was thanks to your support we were able to make such a profit. Please accept the money.”

“Very well. I gratefully accept it,” answered Marcella. He slid the receipt over. “And—not Chairwoman Rossetti but Dahlia—let me pay you back for the bracelet with this money. Whatever I still owe you, I’ll pay you back in installments.”

“But Marcella, you’re about to have kids—twins at that—and I don’t think Irma will be returning to work soon,” she said, wanting him to have some elbow room.

“My wage from both Lord Scalfarotto and the company is plenty. Besides, I still have money saved up from my courier work, so we’ll be all right.” He was adamant about giving her the money, and having been his friend for so long,

she knew he wouldn't take no for an answer here.

"Okay, then, if you insist. I'll take the sum of the interest as repayment toward the bracelet. I'll get you to thank Lord Guido as well, so we can consider this debt settled."

"Whoa, what about the materials cost? And the labor?"

"Professor Oswald traded the cost of the materials for my help on future projects and Tobias said he wouldn't take money for his labor, so the twenty gold covers everything. As for the Zola Company and Lord Guido, I'll think of some way to repay them sooner or later."

"All right. I'll put my all into my work and I'll think of how I can thank them too," Marcella said before pointing his brown eyes toward Mezzena. "No worries about moving now, eh?"

"I might even be able to move into a place with a hot water dispenser."

That caught Dahlia's attention. "Erm, are they hounding you at your home too, Mezzena?"

"There"—he paused to craft his sentence—"aren't that many people."

The way he looked away sheepishly made Dahlia feel even more terrible. He couldn't possibly relax if people were accosting him at his home about supposed connections with the nobility. "We are to blame for that as well, so we will find a new place for you. After this, please let us know what preferences or requirements you may have. You should stay at an inn tonight as well."

"Thank you very much, and sorry about the trouble," he said. "Oh, and could you please call me Mena, chairwoman and vice-chairman? 'Mezzena' is a bit of a mouthful and it doesn't sit right with me, as everyone back in the Couriers' called me Mena as well."

"Very well, Mena." Calling him by his nickname made Dahlia feel like they've grown closer, if only by a bit.

"From this day forth, we shall bring prosperity to the Rossetti Trading Company!" Ivano declared, to smiles from everyone in the office—which, incidentally, must've shrunk again.

After they had gone through their agenda, the Rossetti Company decided to close early for the day. Dahlia and Marcella decided to take a carriage together to the tower.

“Oh, Mena, would you mind staying behind for a little bit? I want to talk to you about your accommodations,” said Ivano.

“Of course not.”

“I’ve got knight trainin’ in the mornin’—uh, I mean, I have training in the morning at the Scalfarotto estate, but I shall return in the afternoon.”

“I hope everything goes well, Marcella,” Ivano said.

“Yeah, I just hope my head doesn’t explode...” The man with the sandy hair let out a defeated sigh. Yesterday, he had started lessons in knightly etiquette, and he seemed to have been overloaded with new knowledge. It wasn’t as though he was a complete stranger to that world—he had regularly made deliveries to the mansions of the nobility—but apparently a knight needed to know more. It would be one-on-one hands-on training with a veteran, and they’d be at it from morning to lunch, going through how to greet people, walk down a hallway, eat properly, and even bathroom etiquette. Hearing about it was enough to make Ivano’s head spin too.

“I know you can do it, Marcella. You’ll come out of it just fine.” Dahlia supported her good friend with an innocent smile.

But his was full of pain. “Pray for me, Dahlia...” And he opened the door and the two of them stepped out of the room, leaving Ivano with Mena in the office.

“Mena, please have a seat,” the vice-chairman said. “Would somewhere in this area be suitable for you? I have three places picked out already, and the company shall lease you whichever you like. As well, I’ll have you stay in this inn until you move in.”

“Thank you very much. Whichever is the cheapest of the three would be great. Same goes for the inn...” After Mena glanced over the documents on the table, he had an apologetic look about him. He may have been young, but he seemed to know the value and importance of money, and, fortunately, he was

not seeking to take advantage of the company either.

“Don’t worry, the company will pay for your lodging. It’d be a nuisance if anybody were to bother you during your stay, so I recommend this inn, as they guard their guests as well.”

“That would be great. I can’t say it enough, but thank you...” Mena’s newfound relief only showed how mentally exhausted he had been up until now; there must have been more people who were interested in the company and in the chairwoman than Ivano had expected.

“Is anything else bothering you? I ask that you don’t hesitate to tell me.”

“Actually, about my salary...” Mena said. “It’s more than what I was making at the Couriers’ Guild, and I’m not sure whether you aren’t overpaying me.”

“The company owes you for the trouble we have caused you thus far. We don’t have many employees either, so you might have to take on miscellaneous tasks aside from deliveries. Oh, and of course, the more responsibilities you have, the more your salary will go up.” They’d poached Mena away from the Couriers’, so a thirty-percent pay bump wasn’t unreasonable. And with how much work there was in store for him, he would hardly be overpaid. “By the way, can you cast body strengthening, or are you otherwise capable with magic?”

“Yes, I have body strengthening, which grants me the ability to carry up to three times my body weight with ease. My magic is rated at grade four, and I possess air magic—just enough for a light breeze and to dry off my sweaty clothes in the summer.”

“And you mentioned you have experience as a driver as well?”

“That is correct. I’ve always loved horses, so I’ve taken care of them and ridden them quite frequently as well. I am good enough to make urgent deliveries within the capital.”

“Marcella said it ‘wasn’t uncommon’ to need to defend himself, and so you have experience with that as well?” Self-defense was necessary for couriers, as there were people who wanted to rob their deliveries. It was common outside of city limits, but especially when delivering big-ticket items to nobles, making

body strengthening a highly desirable asset for the Couriers' Guild.

"I was partnered with Marcella, so I have some experience, yes." Mena's apparent lack of enthusiasm for fighting improved Ivano's appraisal of him, and all in all, he seemed like a competent young man. It might cost a bit more money to poach someone of his caliber from the Couriers' again.



When Ivano narrowed his navy blue eyes, it was time for the question he had been meaning to ask all along. “Mena, how long have you worked as a gossip-bird?”

A beat, then he answered truthfully, “About three years or so?” Gossip-birds were people paid to spread gossip; Mena would talk to people in bars and diners where commoners congregated.

“Will you continue after this?”

“I have thought about quitting after joining the company...”

“If you don’t mind telling me the details of what you say, then I won’t mind you continuing. I’m sure it’s a lucrative side gig, and we might just give you work too.” Ivano smiled pointedly as he looked straight into the youth’s aqua eyes. “Marcella isn’t aware of this, is he?”

“I haven’t told him, no. Marcella’s prone to worrying and I didn’t want him to ask too many questions, so I figured I would make a little pocket money for myself on the down low.”

“May I ask as to how you spend your extra cash?”

Mena looked back indifferently. “Relationships. I’m a bit of a free lover, you see, and the costs add up.”

Free love was considered a symbol of the freedom enjoyed by the citizens in the Kingdom of Ordine. Those who engaged in it generally did away with the idea of exclusive relationships between couples and instead adopted a broader, polyamorous definition. And if all parties consented to it, everybody won. Ivano, though, didn’t really see the appeal; he had eyes for his wife and only for her. “I understand. As long as you don’t bring trouble to the company, your relationships are a personal matter and we won’t poke our nose into it.”

“Thank you. I’ll be careful.”

Ivano took another good look at Mena—his soft, chestnut-colored hair, fine features, and refreshing aqua eyes fit perfectly with his trim courier build and light blue jacket. Seeing Volf all the time had numbed Ivano, but Mena was a handsome man too. Not that Ivano was envious, but he understood why Mena

was so popular. “Thank you very much for your time. The inn knows you’re coming already. I doubt there will be people following you if you exit through the back of the guildhall.”

“Likewise, and thank you very much, vice-chairman. Allow me to excuse myself for the day,” he said, putting to use the polite figure of speech he had learned earlier in the afternoon.

All by his lonesome, Ivano tidied up the documents before unfurling onto his desk a sheet of parchment that Guido had sent: *Mezzena Grieve. Parents unknown. Raised in a state-run institution. Hired by the Couriers’ Guild on Marcella’s referral. Established reputation of a hard worker.* His abilities were above expectations, he had Marcella’s guarantee, and his clean background meant he wasn’t tied to any noble—a rare gem indeed. However, what was unexpected was how he had lied earlier.

While the background check had revealed that he had many female friends, what he’d failed to mention was that they had all grown up in an institution together. The money he earned was donated away anonymously, and the places he frequented were orphanages. He couldn’t be faulted for saying his money went to “relationships,” but he hadn’t been exactly honest either. Why was he self-deprecating and why did he claim to be a free lover? Because he was embarrassed to admit the truth? Because he wanted to act tough like young men tended to do? Ivano had no answer to that question yet.

His master Oswald had previously recommended that he “raise a puppy” as soon as possible, meaning to find and train someone young and reliable within the company. Mena was friendly and not timid, knew propriety to some extent, and didn’t warrant worrying about if he was sent out alone for deliveries. He had body strengthening magic and the skills to protect himself. And he was a gossip-bird, and that meant he was able to swallow the many shades of gray that appeared in this world. His ever so slight disposition toward dishonesty would hardly blemish the fact that he could be raised into a very competent businessman. Not that Ivano could claim to be one himself, but collecting useful subordinates and trustworthy allies was always a good idea.

“The responsibilities just keep stacking up...” Ivano said aloud, and then

chuckled to himself.

The Marsh Spider Hunt and Field Rations

Having traveled a full day eastward from the royal capital, the Order of Beast Hunters had arrived at a small town with a handful of coaching inns along the highway. The town's reservoir had a spider problem too big for the local guards and adventurers to handle, hence the deployment of the Beast Hunters. It was just after dusk when the knights had reached the plains downwind of the lake and set up tents. Once dawn broke and they could see their surroundings, the hunt would begin.

"I hope I get back before the evening after tomorrow..."

"Yes, we know, Volf. We heard it a million times already."

"Hey, do you think Volf wants to get back before the evening after tomorrow?"

As his friends teased him, Volf cast his golden gaze at the ground, sighing again and again. The three of them in the tent had their wineskins in their hands. "See, the Rossetti Trading Company is going to have a meet and greet, and obviously I'd like to join in as a guarantor."

"Couldn't you have asked for the day off, then?"

"Not really, not after having taken three days off already recently."

"Yeah, but you haven't really ever requested leave. You can't be working so hard all the time, man."

Dorino had a point—Volf realized he hadn't had much time off since joining the squad, save when he was recovering from injuries and attending his brother's wedding ceremony. When he needed to talk to Guido about Marcella, it might have been the first time he actually requested time off.

"We get twenty days vacation per year, so you ought to use them when you can. It is a good time of the year to do some sightseeing, so why not take a trip out of the capital?"

“Don’t I do that enough already?” Ever since the attack when he was a child, his family hadn’t taken a single trip out of the capital together. Neither did Volf have any desire to go traveling.

“Work doesn’t count, you idiot. Don’t even think of going hunting for rare monsters or harvesting materials on vacation.”

“If anything, Dahlia would like that, I think.”

“Hm.”

“Hmm.” For some reason, Dahlia had been brought into his travel plans, and Randolph and Dorino shared a knowing look behind Volf’s back.

Suddenly, the outer tent flap fluttered harder as the breeze blew stronger. It was supertime, and unlike during the past few expeditions, all was at peace. “So, we’re up against a giant spider tomorrow? If it were a forest serpent or giant boars, I’m sure everybody would look forward to it a bit more.”

“I have never heard of anyone eating giant spiders. Are they edible in the first place?”

“I’ve got no hankering to try one.”

The boys unwrapped the oiled paper containing their meals; they couldn’t avoid the old field rations today.

“Was this stuff always this hard? My jaw’s aching already.”

“This is what we had for the longest time...”

“Luxuries are always welcome, but to lose them? Such is not easy...”

It had been too long since they had had rye and jerky—stuff that was too stubborn to go down without a helping of wine. They were grateful to have food at all, but this was decidedly not good eats.

“Looks like the Second finally have their tents up. Food is food, so I hope they’ll be fine with this stuff.”

“Who knows. I pray they do not choke.”

“We have healing mages. Should be fine.”

A ways away from the Order of Beast Hunters were five tents, each with a

strip of red fabric hanging by the entrance—they were the ones that housed the vice-commander of the Second Knights' Regiment and twelve men. Their presence was perhaps a little confusing, as dealing with monsters was outside the Second's duties, but apparently this joint action had been planned in a meeting a while ago.

The Order of Beast Hunters stood little chance of coming out as victors in a mock battle between the knights. They found themselves unable to adapt their monster-fighting skills for use against human beings, not that they had much training against personnel in the first place. All the other orders looked down on the Beast Hunters for this apparent lack of combat prowess. Some even assumed fighting against monsters was an easy task and that they could do better themselves. Some went so far as to say it out loud.

The vice-commander of the Second Knights' Regiment was among those who had. Coming from a marquis family and poised to be the next commander of the regiment, he was certifiably a knight who could handle his own. He was rarely defeated when sparring with longswords, but he had zero experience going up against monsters.

Captain Grato had been absent for the budget meeting the other day, as he'd had to attend a funeral in the family, so Vice-Captain Griswald had taken his place. At the end of the meeting, the vice-commander had said that "the Order of Beast Hunters were racking up quite the bill" and maybe they should "stop wasting so much time out in the field"; he must've felt free to speak his mind without Grato present.

The commander of the Second Knights' had frantically tried to stop the outburst from his second-in-command, but Griswald had calmly and immediately replied that "we would like to shorten our expeditions, but it would pose a challenge to become any more efficient in combat," his genteel disposition and tone acting as bait for his trap.

"After some discussion, not only has the vice-commander of the Second Knights' selflessly offered his service for today's expedition, he has also graciously lent us the strength of twelve of their regiment's top men. Though their official objective is to join us for experience, the truth is that they are here to help us and to educate us—something we ought to have the utmost

gratitude for. As he has said, and I quote, ‘You Beast Hunters can hang back and learn from us,’ we shall do exactly that and offer the vanguard to the Second Knights’”—so Griswald, with an icy cold smile, had said right before departure today. The whole squad had fallen silent and the rookies who had been standing at the front trembled—Griswald’s intimidation had emanated from him like a cloud of fog.

The Beast Hunters’ vice-captain was a very gentle and kind man as a rule. Even in the face of danger, he would always remain calm and collected. However, as far as the squad knew, there were three exceptions: when he was forced to contend with those who mucked about during training and combat, those who were incompetent and unmotivated, and large reptiles and amphibians.

If he caught anyone messing around during training and combat, his *modus operandi* was to drench them with his water magic, then thunderously berate them. It was an experience shared by almost all rookies. If he deemed anyone incompetent, then he would generally ignore their existence, speaking the bare minimum when giving tasks and training, and offering no advice or encouragement. His unbearable cold shoulder continued until they mended their ways. Lastly, there was nothing he hated more than reptiles and amphibians, especially large ones, like forest serpents and titan frogs. The only sort of mercy they would receive when he saw them was instant death; when the forest serpent had appeared during their expedition the other day, he had had to be excused from the fight so as to not damage the precious meat.

The contempt and disdain that the vice-commander had heaped upon the Order of Beast Hunters must’ve enraged Griswald, and he was more than likely still struggling not to erupt. Many in the squad had worried for him during their journey here, but starting with those who had served with him for many years, they had gradually started to understand Griswald’s plan.

From the crack of dawn until the dying rays of dusk, the knights had been traveling on rough roads. They knew the ins and outs of traversing unfavorable terrain on horseback. Their break had been short—just enough time to care for the horses and to down a nibble of their paltry rations of water, rye, and jerky. After they were back in the saddle, the knights had some dried fruit to chew on

as they journeyed. The Beast Hunters were used to this; the Second, who spent most of their time within the castle and capital, had managed to endure it too, though the longer they traveled, the less everyone had spoken—even to complain.

When they had finally arrived at the campgrounds, it had been obvious that the knights were drained, yet that wasn't a sign to rest easy; they'd still had to secure the perimeter, take care of the horses, set up a watchpost and an area for human waste, and level ground for tents, among the mountain of other chores. The Beast Hunters had volunteered to keep watch and do the other tasks. The Second Knights' had struggled to pitch their tents in the tall grass, and just when the Beast Hunters were wondering if they should do it for them or help them out, a smiling Griswald had gone to give the Second Knights' some guidance.

Afterwards, it was suppertime—not with their novel camp stoves but their original field rations. Members of the Second had likely brought their own food as well, but it would undoubtedly be nothing too satisfying or satiating. Besides, they were out camping tonight, and that was something they probably weren't used to doing.

The Beast Hunters sympathized more with the Second as the night went on, at least until they took a look at what was in their hands and realized whose fault it was. “Man, this rye bread and jerky just sucks. It's sustenance, but just barely.”

“May I interest you in some dried kraken, Dorino?”

“What the hell do you keep in your breast pockets? And gimme.” With a thank-you, Dorino grabbed the treat from Volf's hand.

Then, Randolph reached for a package in his rucksack. “Would you like some dried sweet potatoes? They're nice and sweet.”

“Don't mind if I do. Oh, this brings back memories; I had them so much as a kid. Where did you get this stuff?”

“The Rossetti Trading Company. When they visited us a while back, I had requested something sweet I could bring with me. Apparently, this is a childhood snack of sorts.”

“Hm. Is that right?”

“Of *Sir Ivano’s*, Volf.”

Volf wrinkled his brow; it wasn’t like he had asked if it were Dahlia or anything. He cleared his throat and fished his water bottle out of his bag.

“Estervino, anyone?”

“I’ve got my own liquor. Some for you, Randolph?”

“I have brought pear wine from the city center,” he said, taking out a small glass bottle with chunks of the fruit floating inside. It was indistinguishable by sight from pure honey and likely just as sweet.

“You don’t like fruit wines from the noble side of town? Isn’t that stuff better?”

“That’s true. There are a lot of delicious things to be had there...” Volf thought out loud.

Dorino stared daggers at him. “All right, spill the beans. I can tell you’re thinking about Ms. Dahlia’s cooking again. So? What did she make for you this time?”

“Grilled silversaber.”

“I thought you didn’t like slumfish?”

“I overcame it. It was really good with a bit of fish sauce, grated radish, and some lemon. I even managed to have the guts too.”

“Oh, that does sound good...”

As if they could see through the canvas of the tent, the three of them stared blankly off into the distance and sighed. The more they drank, the more they needed to.

“Let’s not talk about this anymore. I’m getting hungrier as I eat.”

Volf, Randolph, and Dorino snacked on dried seafood and fruit to accompany their alcohol. They likely weren’t the only ones who had sneaked a little something to lift their spirits; quiet, not rowdy, chatter permeated the campground.

“Guess we should hit the hay early tonight. We’ll get to use our stoves for lunch tomorrow, so I’m thinking we’ll get something tasty.”

“But before that, we must deal with the spider first thing in the morning.”

“It’d sure be nice if the Second Knights’ dealt with it for us...”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Dorino.”

“I don’t care who kills it; I just want to get home in time...”

By the warm glow of the magical lantern, the three boys chatted and sighed into the night, the autumnal chirps of insects echoing in the cold moonlight.



When the morning mist dissipated, the view of a blue mirror gently rippling appeared. Shore to shore, the lake was vast; the town and the fields depended on it as their water source. The lakeside had become home to a titan of a spider, its pale green cobwebs covering the trees that lined the path. Making silk the thickness of rope was an arachnid to scale, and its cephalothorax and abdomen together measured about four meters in length. Its body was a dark blue-green that gradated to black towards the legs and was covered in bristly hair stiff enough to pierce through skin and flesh. It had eight black eyes that glinted in the sun but were otherwise unmoving, making you question whether it was watching you or not.

“That is a marsh spider.”

“I see you are very knowledgeable,” Griswald replied with a plastered smile.

That was a given. How could he, the vice-commander of the Second Knights’ Regiment, have come unprepared? It was true he was unaccustomed to the tribulations of the journey, but he had managed. When he had heard that their mark was a giant spider, he had flipped through books and bestiaries, queried the mages, and then come up with a stratagem against it. The coloration was a distinguishing feature of the marsh spider. His research told him that it had immense strength but no venom and was weak to fire. Fortunately, the lake was right there beside them, and there would be little risk of flames spreading uncontrollably. He would have fire mages blast the marsh spider, then the other knights would lop off its eight legs. Once immobilized, it should be easy work. In

addition to himself as the leader, there were twelve knights; eight legs between twelve knights should pose no problem at all. As the books said that the cobwebs were inflammable, he had equipped the knights with heat-resistant armor and boots—they could use fire magic or magical tools to free themselves if they got entangled.

“Allow us to depart at once. The Order of Beast Hunters should hang back and observe.”

“We are grateful for the opportunity,” the vice-captain replied, his tone just as sarcastic.

Behind them were the knights examining and exchanging glances with their counterparts. Though they all operated out of the castle, they hadn’t had many chances to interact with each other save for the mock battles, and those were short-term affairs; the two units were not familiar with each other’s strengths, nor did they know how to work together.

“Begin the extermination!” As the Beast Hunters looked on—some with curiosity, more with suspicion, and Griswald with a smile devoid of warmth—the Second Knights’ Regiment charged at the marsh spider in two teams of six. The crack troops coursed swiftly through the brush, in spite of the heavy armor weighing them down. Leading the attack were four mystic knights launching crimson blazes to reduce the monster to naught but soot. But then, through the veil of smoke and steam came a sizzling noise—the marsh spider had snuffed out the fires.

“They spit water?!” the knights said, shocked by the defensive maneuver. The vice-commander recalled neither the books nor the mages saying anything about marsh spiders being able to store water.

Monsters, too, strove their hardest in combat. There weren’t many that survived to grow this large, and the ones that did must’ve learned and adapted to fight in many situations and environments.

Likely agitated by the flames, the marsh spider leaped from the shadows of the trees, their jumping strength correlating with their physical size. The next thing the assailants knew, all eight of the monster’s eyes were bearing down on them.

“Surround it! Cast fire at range!” the vice-commander shouted, and the knights began moving into formation. But quicker was the marsh spider, and it blasted its silk; a knight was sent flying and crashed into the man behind him. Their blades were powerless to cut through the silk, and the two of them were bound together.

“Use your fire!” Following the command, one of the knights rushed forward to hurl flames with his magical tool, only to singe the silk but otherwise leave it unharmed.

“I thought it was inflammable?!” The vice-commander was correct, but only if the silk were dry. The large arachnid, with its experience, knew to use water to dampen and weigh down its silk.

Anything that came so close to the marsh spider’s mouth was prey, and it chomped down on a knight’s arm, dragging him closer so that it could sink its fangs into his skull.

“Hold it right there!” the vice-commander shouted. He was supposed to be in a leadership role today, but he could not allow his own miscalculations to cause the death of his dear subordinates. In one swift motion, the vice-commander pried open the spider’s mouth, then flung the knight backwards; hopefully, there would be someone to pick him up.

The vice-commander had a more pressing concern. Coming down before his eyes was one of the barbed legs; he took the brunt with his sword, but that sent the force into his shoulder and elbow. Next, the spider immobilized him by slinging its rope around his feet. His enemy’s black jaw, white teeth, and red mouth were too close for comfort, and the vice-commander realized this was the first time his air magic had failed to activate because of stress.

His blade creaked and he sank even lower, realizing he could only last so long before his body gave out; being recognized for his strength by his comrades apparently meant little against the might of a large monster—such an obvious observation to make moments before his death. These so-called monsters were more like demons. The vice-commander finally understood—if too late—what the Order of Beast Hunters did, and what shock, fright, hubris, and weakness were.

And then, “Charge!” A sharp voice cut through the air, accompanied by three dull crashes of a tam-tam, and vivid red flashed across his vision. Breaking through the scenery of the green forest and azure lake and rushing to his side were those clad in red, those who assumed the most dangerous role in their order: the Scarlet Armors. But his sword groaned, and those fangs were closing in on him faster than the Beast Hunters.

Just when the vice-commander thought it was too late, a man with dark blue hair slid between him and the spider. Without so much as a moment of hesitation, he thrust both of his shortswords into its mouth. Again, anything that came so close to the marsh spider’s mouth was prey, and the monster bit down with all its might. “Ice Needle!” In exchange for his left arm, the blue-haired man had the spider’s jaw in shreds; the next thing that was visible was a chunk of ice covered in red. The marsh spider screamed in pain.

Before he had a grasp on the situation at hand, the vice-commander found a hulking arm grabbing him from behind. “Pardon.” This giant of a Scarlet Armor ripped him from his gossamer shackles as if they were made of paper, then grabbed the vice-commander and his subordinate, one in each arm. But the spider objected to his plan, and it swiped down with one of its legs as the giant was depositing the downed men behind him. He had no choice—to move to the left or the right, he would have to sacrifice one of the knights in his arms. He took the blow with his helmet, yet the giant’s grip was steadfast. The vice-commander searched frantically for the man who had first come to his rescue; he followed the gushing blood and saw the now one-armed man retreating.

Taking his place, a tall man with uncovered black hair, wielding a black longsword in each hand, faced the enemy. Using the spider’s leg as a springboard, he soared into the sky—the power of someone with air magic or perhaps assistance from an air mage, as that was no height achievable by physical strength. The leaping man dropped onto the spider’s back, then traced three arcs with his blades. The next moment, the marsh spider had been blinded in all eight of its eyes and its pedipalp went flying.

“Nasty piece of work, that Dark Lord of ours.”

“We’ve gotta tie this up quick before he steals the show.” The vice-commander overheard a pair of relaxed voices—jovial, even—that culminated

in the terrifying stomping of their boots.

With its sense of sight taken away, the almost pitiful marsh spider flailed its legs around, but its last moments were short; the Beast Hunters descended on the monster and took but a moment to dissect it.

“Such brilliant diversionary tactics, Vice-Commander. We are most obliged for your assistance today.”

“No, I, erm...”

Smiling, Griswald raised his hand in a way that the men behind could not see to stop the vice-commander from continuing his line of thought. “We have accomplished our objectives today. As a thank-you to everyone from the Second Knights’ Regiment for accompanying us, please join us in tonight’s celebration.”

“A celebration, sir?”

“Indeed. We have recently started fielding the camp stove, so I am hoping we can all try them out together.”

The vice-commander reckoned Griswald was merely changing topics to calm the men of the Second, but the Beast Hunters lit up when they heard there would be celebrations.

“Vice-Captain Griswald! Permission to catch some fish for tonight?”

“Permission granted.”

The knights flew to retrieve pikes and nets, eager to catch something for dinner. Was that just how the Beast Hunters operated during expeditions, or were they entertaining guests? The vice-commander could not tell.

“Those wounded, come this way!” shouted a priest. The vice-commander himself as well as his subordinate with the bitten arm and a handful of other knights headed for treatment.

Laughing and chatting with the priest were the blue-haired youth and the copper-haired giant. “You two...” the vice-commander began, “I am most obliged to you two for saving our lives. Are you okay?”

“Aye. This is but a precautionary check-up for me.”

“Good to see that you made it. I’m fine too—look at my new arm.” His pale arm stuck out of his sleeveless garment.

“Does—erm—does it hurt? Perhaps you should give it some rest.”

“Not to worry. I’m used to this sort of injury.”

“You’re *used* to it?” He had heard that the Beast Hunters suffered a high injury rate, but for this man to have had his arm bitten or torn off so many times that he was now accustomed to it? The vice-commander couldn’t imagine it.

“Losing a limb on the job isn’t uncommon. I’ve lost this arm more than a dozen times and my legs countless times more.”

“And you’re...okay?”

“I lose a bit of muscle each time, but it’s nothing that can’t be fixed with physical conditioning,” the youth said with a smile as he gave his new, pale arm a squeeze.

“I humbly apologize for causing you such terrible trouble. How may I ever make up for—”

“It’s you guys’ first time against monsters, right? Anyone would be nervous.”

“You are correct in that it was our first time engaging monsters...”

“Then of course! The first time I went up against goblins, I was quaking in my booties; one of the more experienced members had to grab me by the collar and chuck me away from danger.”

“I myself was too heavy to be moved,” the giant added. “I curled up into a ball until the battle was over, so I have been told.”

The knights all laughed together. The mage, however, did anything but. “My first time against a cragsnake, I was trembling too hard to even cast my magic and instead almost became a screaming snack. The rest of the squad commended me for being such a good distraction and bait, for whatever that’s worth.”

“Bait...” The subordinate went pale.

The vice-commander muttered, “To hunt monsters is to put your life on the line...”

“It’s only natural that they fight their damndest to survive. Dealing with that is just part of the job,” the youth with the navy hair replied matter-of-factly.

After his subordinate had his arm healed, the vice-commander had the priest take a look at his elbow and shoulder. He had assumed it was a superficial injury, but he learned the full extent of the damage only when the dull pain disappeared.

When everybody could breathe again, the men began loading usable parts of marsh spider onto the wagon—fangs for weapons, hair for defensive enchantments, and its heart for medicine. The knights explained that they would dig a giant pit and bury the corpse, pour some drink over it, and pray for its soul after they were done harvesting its parts; that they would go to such lengths to pay respects to a monster slain was something the vice-commander had only learned today.

“The preparations are complete, Vice-Commander. This way, if you please.”

In no time at all, the grassy plain was tarped over with waterproof cloth weighed down by camp stoves and wineskins. The vice-commander, trying to hide his embarrassment and awkwardness, sat down beside Griswald as he’d been invited to. Nearby, a man with golden eyes was grilling small fish, and upon closer inspection, he looked to be the one who had jumped and landed on the spider’s back. There were more marks on his scarlet armor than areas unscathed.

As the vice-commander was hesitating to call out to him, the man turned to him with a beautiful smile. “Would you care for some grilled fish? Lightly salted and fresh from the lake.”

The vice-commander stared at the skewered fish in his hand, as if waiting for it to give him instructions on how to eat itself. He looked over to his side and saw Griswald sinking his teeth into the whole thing; that must be the way of the Beast Hunters, and so he followed Griswald’s lead and took cautious nibbles.

The hot, tender fish flaked apart. It wasn't particularly fatty, but its simplicity and freshness were unbeatable, and the delicate sweetness of the flesh and the salty crunch of the skin were a perfect match. Whatever annoyance its tiny bones posed was overshadowed by the joy of the meal. "This is delicious..."

How could a simple sprinkling of salt on grilled fish be so delightful? The other knights seemed just as pleasantly surprised.

"In times past, every single meal every day during an expedition consisted of the dark bread and jerky we had yesterday—maybe a watery vegetable broth if we were lucky."

"Did you not cook over your campfire?"

"It was not uncommon that our work brought us to swampland or deserts, meaning we hadn't many chances to even light a campfire. But now, thanks to the camp stove, our squad is finally able to have a warm meal, and nothing could please our captain more. This is why our expenses are up this period, despite the fact that the company that sells them is making next to nothing—forgoing profit as a token of their support."

"I see..."

Griswald flipped over the camp stove, pointing out the stamped letters that read *Rossetti*. "Any meal we have in the field could very well be the last supper for any of us," the grave leader of the Beast Hunters said. Then he lowered his voice. "I was a strong proponent of introducing the camp stove to our squad."

"I have learned today that I knew nothing about either monsters or combat, Vice-Captain—no, rather, Sir Griswald Lanza."

But when the vice-commander dipped his head to apologize, Griswald looked at him with his deep blue eyes and extended a wineskin his way. "Vice-Commander, if you are about to apologize, I urge you to reconsider."

"But—"

"Our duties differ, so naturally, our strengths and weaknesses differ as well."

"But it was my shameful display that caused your men to suffer today."

"Nothing unusual, I assure you. All the Beast Hunters have fully recovered."

And more importantly, have we lost a single person?”

“No...” A shiver went down the vice-commander’s spine. He and his subordinate had stared death in the face. He had had no idea about the terror of fighting against monsters. He had not been ready for the eternal sleep.

“It’s a good thing our captain remained at the castle today—you would have had quite the rebuke too.”

“I can imagine that.” This disgrace had been entirely his own fault; any criticism would have been fully warranted.

“Just the other day, my captain reminded me that I was unfit to succeed him so long as I would protect a single subordinate. ‘A captain commands; to risk his life for the sake of one subordinate before fully grasping the situation puts the entire squad in harm’s way,’ he said,” Griswald recalled to him. “Being an officer sure is no simple task.”

“Yes, quite so.” Even Griswald had risked his life to save one of his men. Understandable, of course, but it was something that a vice-captain or a vice-commander should know better than to do.

However, there was one thing that set Griswald apart from himself—that Griswald was a true person of character. In spite of all the blunders and disrespect thrown his way, he remained the bigger man. He had not left the vice-commander to die; he hadn’t even ridiculed him. All Griswald did was calmly and gently show the correct path by walking on it. Was he naturally a better person, a person of a higher caliber?

The vice-commander chewed the cud, then made a request. “Vice-Captain, I understand that it may once again cause you trouble, but would you graciously allow me to join you for another expedition? There is much I wish to learn from you. Only when convenient, of course.”

“You are most welcome to do so. Likewise, I would appreciate any training in anti-personnel combat,” Griswald replied. “When we return to the capital, shall we hold a social gathering with the captain and commander as well?”

“I would love to. Thank you for your invitation.” It wasn’t clear who had held out his wineskin first, but the two clashed leather as a matter of course.

The sound of warm conversation between knights from both units spread across the plains. There were those grilling more fresh fish from the lake, those grilling meat and vegetables, those bringing back more wine from the chuck wagon; the men grew closer to each other, and the lively lakeside celebrations lasted through the night. The Second Knights' Regiment would go on to regularly join the Order of Beast Hunters in their expeditions.

Furthermore, on the journey home, the combined unit came across a cragsnake. The unlucky thing slipped off the rocky cliffs during a turf war and landed on top of the leader of the leading pack—Griswald. The beast towered more than a head above him, but without a moment of delay, he fired off Water Lance and slew it.

The Second Knights' Regiment was behind the Beast Hunters, and when they caught up to the scene, they asked what had happened. The vice-commander voiced his admiration, remarking how "Sir Griswald is not only a person of character but a fierce warrior as well!"

What he hadn't seen was that Griswald's subordinates had tried to restrain the "person of character" and vice-captain but had failed to prevent him from beating the corpse and all its precious materials into an unidentifiable mess of viscera, save for a single gray tooth.

The Rossetti Trading Company's Get-Together

It had been decided that the Rossetti Trading Company would host their get-together at The Black Cauldron, a restaurant by the harbor that Volf had once recommended. The architecture suited the name—its black brick exterior and black shingles induced in onlookers the vision of a cauldron.

In a private room at the back of the restaurant, Dahlia, Ivano, and Fermo sat around an oval table. Glasses and drinks had been put out already, but the food was only to be served when the others arrived; the specialist craftsman of small goods had requested to meet ahead of time.

“Sorry to drag you out here so early, Ms. Dahlia,” Fermo said. His graying brown hair was brushed neatly, his face was cleanly shaven, his white shirt was spotless, and his dark brown pointed-toe dress shoes—which perfectly matched his new moss-green double-breasted suit—were buffed to a blinding sheen, contrasting greatly with his customary casual look. Frankly, seeing him gussied up like this made Dahlia somewhat nervous. “I’d like to thank you again. The earnings from the foaming soap dispensers have revived my workshop, and the net profits are forecast to exceed previous years. Thanks to your unicorn pendant, my wife Barbara has been able to return to work. Truly, thank you for everything you have given us. I wouldn’t be here today without you.”

“Thank you very much for your kind words. But you can’t attribute your success to me—it is your skill and your team’s hard work that have revitalized your business,” Dahlia said. His improvements to the soap dispensers had helped her more than anything, and the same went for the camp stove; Fermo was the man to go to for design and assembly.

He scratched his cheek with his index finger, then shot his dark green eyes straight upwards. “With so many different things to make now, my business has outgrown my workshop. Got myself more apprentices too, so I’ve been thinking of building a new workshop and attached home out in the West District—picking myself a plot of land not too far from the Green Tower.”

“Wouldn’t you want somewhere in the Central District?”

“With how expensive the Central District is, I wouldn’t be able to build anything large enough. I want a warehouse as well,” Fermo answered. “Besides, you’re out there in the West District.”

“How do I play into it?”

“There are six of them. Take a look.” He reached into his leather briefcase and pulled out a stack of documents that included specifications and blueprints of various items. “Number one: a large version of the foaming soap dispenser with a foot pedal. Good for bubble baths. It doesn’t need magic crystals, and I’ve already got preorders for it. Number two: extendable nozzle for longer reach, say for cleaning second-floor windows. Good for commercial applications. Number three: large wall-mounted dispenser with agitators inside for cheap soaps that tend to separate. Good for shops and businesses that see a lot of traffic. I had a local fishmonger test out a prototype for me and I’m having a tough time getting it back...”

“Wow, they’re all such great ideas...” Dahlia was thoroughly impressed by his skill and creativity. He had already done many different designs for the bottle part, but these evolutions were completely different and nothing that she had even imagined. That last one would be perfect for those who washed their hands often throughout the day.

Fermo continued, “Number four: a dispenser that whips up more concentrated soap for a stiffer foam. Good for facial cleansers, I’d say. These take a bit more work to make, so they won’t be as cheap, but Madam Gabriella said nobles would snatch all of them up.” It was a slightly different construction than the rest, but it was obvious from just looking at them that they were intricately crafted. He had drawn up many different versions, too, including ones with fancy cut glass and silver accents. Even Dahlia couldn’t wait to get her hands on one.

“You have four designed already? That’s incredible, Mr. Fermo...”

“That’s not it. Number five: an improved camp stove with processed magisteel for a slick surface on the skillet and the shallow pot. It won’t need much grease, it’ll be easy to clean, and not even a crepe will stick on it. Number

six: a processed griddle for food stalls. This one's stick-resistant too, and it's been treated so it wouldn't chip easily. I'll partner up with a blacksmith for these two items, so the actual production will be handled on their end. We'll be getting just the dividends."

"Much obliged," Ivano said with a smile. Judging by his lack of surprise, he must've talked it over with Fermo already.

"So, there we have it. I'd appreciate it if you could put all six of these down as jointly developed. Fifty-fifty split between us." Fermo handed six pages over—the registration documentation for the small goods.

"Um, Mr. Fermo, you understand that it's the first time I've even seen these..." When a magical tool was registered with the Merchants' Guild, its inventor was paid royalties for every sale. These were all Fermo's intentions. It would have made sense if they were improvements to the foaming soap dispenser, but the cookware consisted of his own original designs, more or less; Dahlia had had no hand in them and could not see how she deserved half of the profits.

"But it was you who thought up and crafted the soap dispenser and the camp stove, Ms. Dahlia, and so it's naturally a joint development."

"These are hardly variations of what I made; these are completely new inventions—especially the non-stick pan and griddle," she reasoned. "The registration documents are for new inventions too. I can't help but think it would be unreasonable to take half of the royalty payments from you."

"Remember what I said when we met the first time?" Fermo put his foot down. "I said I wouldn't forget the favor you did me and that I'd come up with great ideas and make 'em well, didn't I?"

"Yes, I remember that..." When they had met for the first time, he had said that he wouldn't take any charity, despite the hardships his workshop was facing. This must have been his way of repaying his debts.

"You made me put my name down as your collaborator. Won't you do the same for me?"

Dahlia was powerless against his sunny smile. It was tit for tat—avenged

sixfold, even—in the most craftsperson-like manner, but that was what she deserved for going up against someone with much more experience than her. “Very well. Thank you for letting me cosign your inventions.” This was usury and she vowed to get him back, she thought as she inked the documents. Still, seeing their names one over the other made her a little happy.

Ivano turned to Fermo and the two men exchanged a knowing smile—one that excluded Dahlia. “That’s quits now, eh, Fermo?”

“Yeah. Time for persuasion.” Fermo stood up from his seat and approached Dahlia. A deep breath to steady his nerves, then he looked at her with utmost seriousness. “Ms. Dahlia—no, Chairwoman Rossetti, please have me,” he said, extending his right hand.

A beautiful glass case containing a pair of fire crystals sat atop his palm and caused her to freeze. “Mr. Fermo?!” In Ordine, to be “struck in the chest with a fire crystal” was an idiom for falling in love, and so giving someone a fire crystal was, needless to say, a declaration of love. But Fermo was a married man, and this was not the kind of persuasion he would engage in.

He explained, “I want for us to keep coming up with inventions together, things that the world has never seen, magical tools or small articles or whatever they may be classified as. I want to make things that change how people live. I want to make them with you, and I want the capital or even the whole country to use them. That’s why I want you to have me and my workshop as subcontractors. I want to exclusively manufacture for the Rossetti Trading Company.” The look in his eyes was as straightforward and honest as his words.

Dahlia did not interrupt him and instead silently and gravely considered his proposal. His skills and imagination were unlike anyone else’s. His craftsmanship was well beyond her as well. He and Oswald were peers but in different fields. His insight, knowledge, and experience would be a boon, and to have the Gandolfi Workshop as a subsidiary would be an obvious win. But there was one thing that Dahlia could not get past. Fermo’s deep green eyes were reminiscent of her father Carlo’s. They were both craftsmen who produced original designs. Just by holding an object in their hands, they could intuit improvements. Fermo Gandolfi was an artisan, and his name deserved to be stamped onto all of his creations. A titan like him was not and could not be

beneath her—he ought to be beside her.

“Thank you very much for the offer, but I must refuse.”

“Hm. Shame.” He shook that solemn look off of his face, clearing the way for a smile to return. “Well, I’m not someone to give up after being rejected once. I’ll come up with something even better and I’ll try to change your mind then.”

“No, Mr. Fermo, I would love to work with you—not as a subcontractor or a subsidiary but as fellow craftspeople, as equals.”

“Equals, eh?”

“That’s right. You said you would like to construct a new workshop in the West District? I would be delighted to have you close by. However, you deserve more than just me; you should have other artisans and magical toolmakers as well to come up with greater things.” Perhaps she hadn’t put it in the best way; Fermo’s expression soured. When she searched for how to rephrase, her past self came to mind. “Oh, I know! Mr. Fermo, why not found your own company?”

“A company? Who, me?!” Just as she had been when the suggestion had first been brought to her, Fermo was dumbfounded.

“Who else but you? I cannot be a founding guarantor for a new company, but I would be more than happy to be a standard guarantor.” To be eligible, a new business’s guarantor needed to be an adult. They had to have been chairperson or vice-chairperson of a company registered with the Merchants’ Guild for three or more years, or have been working as a member of one of the city’s guilds for at least three years. A noble of the rank of viscount or above was also eligible. Dahlia had neither the rank nor the experience to serve in that capacity. But just as she had recently done with the Zola Company, she could add her name as one of Fermo’s other guarantors. “If you have your own company, we would be equals as chairpersons. We could have a business partnership down the line. Your new workshop and warehouse would have more credibility too. I could talk to Volf and Gabriella about the guarantor thing, or if not, I’m sure the guild would be glad to hear out someone like you, Mr. Fermo.”

“Hang on a tick! You make it sound like founding a business is duck soup...” In

his fluster, the glass case slipped out of his hand, and Dahlia rushed to pick it up.

“If you’re okay with me, I would be more than happy to help you with all the procedures and paperwork involved, *Chairman Gandolfi*.”

“Quit that out, Ivano! *You* were the one who told me to ask to be a subcontractor in the first place!”

“I abide by my chairwoman’s will,” he said with a straight face. Of the three people in the room, Ivano was the only one who was composed. “Not only can you get the guarantors you need, you can double or even triple your projected earnings. Besides, if you’re going to build a new workshop or warehouse or home, you might as well build it well. You’ll have access to the newest equipment, rare metals and materials, a glassworks next door, the best talent, and whatnot. It’s cheaper to build everything outright than to expand, you know?”

“Yer blowing this way out of proportions, Ivano.”

“No, I wouldn’t say so. You would need a big plot of land for what you are planning, and even more so if you want a warehouse for goods and materials. Besides, if you are situated in the West District, you won’t want to make frequent trips to the guildhall like you could in Central,” Dahlia added. “Would we be able to finance this undertaking, Ivano?”

“But of course. Let the cash flow, I say! Our partnership is all but in place already.”

Fermo wasn’t quite as sure. “Hey, listen, I’m no spring chicken...”

“You know it’s not very manly of you to moan about your age, Fermo. You were serious about persuading our chairwoman, were you not? What’s wrong with being not beneath but beside Ms. Dahlia? Or better yet, why not try to be above her? Assuming you have the chance of overtaking us, that is.”

“You really are a fiend, you know that?”

Just as Dahlia was about to stop the two of them from going for each other’s throats, she realized what was in her hands—the glass case with the fire crystals that she had picked up earlier. “Mr. Fermo, here.”

“Ouch. So this is what it feels like getting that kind of gift back...” Fermo stared up at the ceiling, refusing to take it back. “All right! Let’s make The Gandolfi Company a reality. Chairwoman Rossetti, Vice-Chairman Mercadante, lend me your strength. I want a workshop and a warehouse in the West District and a glassworks to go with them. So, please, keep those crystals—a gift to commemorate this day.”

“Thank you very much,” she said.

“Then it’s decided,” said Ivano. “We’ll let everyone know and make it a party today!”

“Damn it, Ivano, you’re really not letting me back out of this one...”

“What, did you get cold feet?”

“Hell no!”

“Even if you did, I’m holding you to your promise!”

The two men were in high spirits, but Dahlia was still unsure about something. “Mr. Fermo, erm, is it really okay for me to have these crystals?”

“Yeah. Together forever, and by that I mean our working relationship. Barbara’s not going to take it the wrong way either; she’s been going on and on about how she dreamed of a daughter like you. Take it as a warning, though—she might just try to bring you into the family in that way instead,” he said. Dahlia giggled at the joke—to take her not as a wife but as a daughter was unheard-of to her. Fermo continued, “That glass box is my wife’s handiwork too, by the way. She started working again last month.”

“Oh, I didn’t know Mrs. Barbara was a glassmith.” It was such a finely crafted piece, it surprised Dahlia to hear that his wife was the one who had made it. Then it all made sense—the intricate glass soap bottles and this glass case both featured the same delicate handiwork.

“Yeah, when I was still an apprentice, she was a trainee at the glassworks nearby. She’s actually my master’s first grandchild.”

“I’m sure you two must’ve gotten along well as fellow apprentices. At which workshop did you two meet? Or did your master perhaps put you two

together?”

“That’s, erm...” Fermo hesitated for a moment. “I called out to her on the street. When she invited me over to her family home, it turned out she lived right next door to the workshop I worked at—where my master lived. Barbara used to live in the glassworks, see; that’s why I’d never seen her until then.”

“Wow...” It wasn’t amazement—Dahlia just wasn’t sure whether it had been good or bad luck that the girl he picked up had turned out to be his master’s first granddaughter. But seeing they were still married, she supposed he had been extremely lucky.

Ivano was thinking the same thing. “Hitting on ladies on the street, Fermo? Woof...”

“Hey, come on! It’s, like, fate or destiny or what have you! There’s a word for it, there’s got to be!” he fired back. “But, yeah. After that, things happened, and then we went steady.”

“Fate, you say? Well, can’t escape that.” The two men calmed down a bit, then continued chatting.

The word “fate” struck Dahlia with the memory of being hit on at the food stalls. “I can’t help thinking it’s fate, us meeting here like this,” the man had said to her. They had never met again since, so he must’ve been wrong about that. And if anything, the man she had first met in the forest, then run into a second time in the city was more of a fateful encounter. Dahlia realized her train of thought had derailed, and she quickly shook the thought from her head—she wasn’t sure if it was all right to use that word between two friends. No matter how she sliced it, though, meeting Volf that day had been nothing less than serendipity.



A knock came at the door; joining the three of them in the private room were Marcella and Mena, both of whom sported new suits that matched the color of their eyes—auburn and mint, respectively—and fit them perfectly.

Peeking out of Marcella’s cuff and sparking in the light was a gold engagement bracelet studded with a garnet. Dahlia asked, “How’s Irma,

Marcella?”

“Oh, she’s doing fantastic. She’s devouring enough for three and she’s been making sand everyday too.”

“She showed me too,” Mena added. “It was a gorgeous shade of brown, not unlike black tea.”

“I can turn them into bricks pretty good now, so let me know if your flower bed or fences need any fixing, Dahlia,” said Marcella.

“I’d love some, actually. I think they would make for a great keepsake.”

“I agree! A physical memento before your children are born would be great to have,” Mena said excitedly.

Another knock came at the door. “Thank you for showing me the way,” Lucia said to the host who escorted her in. It was as though a flower had bloomed in the room; her dress had a white-blue gradient and flared at the knees, while delicate white lace covered her chest and upper arms. She wore her green hair up, letting her aquamarine earrings sway. Lucia had always been stylish, yet today she was even more adorable and stunning than usual.

“You’re so pretty, Lucia! I love that dress on you!” Dahlia exclaimed.

“Oh, why, if it isn’t Lucia. I thought a princess had graced us with her presence,” Marcella said.

“Right?! Aren’t I so cute? Mr. Forto and I designed and made the dress from scratch!” As proper and endearing her looks were, the princess transformed into the usual Lucia once she opened her mouth. “You’re stunning too, Dahlia! That dress is absolutely perfect on you!”

“Thank you, but it’s all the designer.”

“Hee hee hee, thanks!”

The dress Dahlia had on was the navy blue one she had worn to the presentation at the castle, and the gloss and depth of the material brought out different shades of blue depending on how it caught the light. Of course, it had been made by none other than Lucia.

Then, Mena slipped in beside the two ladies, looking to introduce himself to

the only person who he hadn't met before. However, before Dahlia could introduce her employee to her friend, Lucia spoke up. "My name is Lucia Fano and I am the head manager at the Magical Garment Factory. A pleasure to meet you."

"I am Mezzena Grieve of the Rossetti Trading Company. It is a delight to meet you, Head Manager Fano." It was impressive how smooth and confident he was; Dahlia envied his people skills.

When they had exchanged their greetings, Lucia turned to Fermo. "Mr. Gandolfi! Your new pot has been wonderful as a slimewell, and the Tailors' Guild would like to make a purchase of more!"

"Much appreciated. It shouldn't be long before we can get them out."

But their conversation left Ivano confused. "May I ask what exactly is a slimewell?"

"When Head Manager Fano and I met at the Merchants', she asked me if there wasn't any kind of receptacle that could hold green slime without it sticking to the sides, so I made her a shallow bowl of sorts."

"The liquid slime needed to make zephyricloth doesn't ever want to come off anything, but with the bowl Mr. Gandolfi made, it isn't a problem at all. It's a bit shallow, though, so maybe a bigger one might be useful."

"Wouldn't it be better if it were like what you're used to, Lucia?" The camp stove pot would certainly work for containing dyes and slime, but if Fermo was going to make a new batch anyway, Dahlia figured Lucia would prefer them to be in the shape of whatever she was using already.

Lucia's dayflower eyes sparkled at the suggestion. "Yes, that's a great idea! Mr. Gandolfi, would you be able to make them like deep buckets instead?"

"Sure could, but it'll cost you more."

"Would it be a lot more?"

"Well, that depends on the size, of course, but without a lid, maybe three times more. I'll give you a bulk rate if you buy enough, though."

"That's great! I think we can use them to mix dyes and pigments too. Next

time, I'll bring you one of the buckets we currently use to give you an idea, if that's okay," Lucia said. "Oh, and Mr. Forto said he'd like to make your acquaintance, Mr. Gandolfi. He might be looking at other containers too. The current palettes we use to mix colors are really hard to clean, apparently."

"Could the griddle be adapted for that, Mr. Fermo?"

"I can't say so for sure until I take a look at what she means by palette, but if it's a metallic flattop you need, I'll talk to my magical toolmakers and blacksmiths and see what we can come up with," Fermo replied. "But, erm, do I really have to pay the Tailors' guildmaster a visit? I don't know if I feel comfortable..." Understandably, wrinkles formed on his brow; Dahlia's stomach had twisted into a knot when she'd sat in a meeting with the viscount and guildmaster for the first time.

"Fermo!" Ivano bellowed. "Before you go to the guildhall, let's talk, you and me. You wouldn't want to be rude or disrespectful to the guildmaster, would you? I'll give you a crash course, but that's for tomorrow—tonight, we fill ourselves with drink!"

"Right. You have a point. I ought to be prepared before I go..."

"That's a plan, then!"

Dahlia felt for Fermo. Being in the position of chairperson meant getting involved with the nobility, and that meant lots of tricky etiquette and unspoken rules to learn; she'd been studying for months and still didn't have it down. If it weren't for Ivano, Gabriella, and Oswald, Dahlia would've fallen flat on her face a long time ago. Good on Ivano for getting Fermo's back and offering to guide him through what may come next.

Ivano continued, "Ms. Lucia, I ask that you delay your response to Mr. Forto. If he asks, feel free to say 'Ivano has seized Chairman Gandolfi.'"

"Sure thing, Mr. Ivano, but what do you mean by 'Chairman Gandolfi'?"

"Fermo is starting his own company," he said unaffectedly. They had only just talked about it, and Fermo had yet to make any preparations. But even so, Ivano broke the news to make it a celebration, just as he had said he would.

"Is that right? Well, congratulations to you, Chairman Gandolfi!"

“I, erm, thank you all.” One by one, they all gave Fermo their congratulations, but his smile was stiff. Still, a man so full of experience as the manager of his own workshop and master to his own apprentices would have no trouble overcoming his nervousness. If anything, Dahlia was the one who ought to strive harder as both chairperson and craftsperson, and she fired herself up.

Across from her, Ivano turned to Fermo. “Be it with the Merchants’ or the Tailors’, you’ll be setting off on your journey as a chairman. This, too, is fate.”

Another knock came at the door, and this time, the host led in a man with black hair. “Sorry for being late,” he said, though he wasn’t more than five minutes behind schedule. His brow and neck were damp with sweat; no doubt he had rushed here from the castle. He wore a white taffeta dress shirt and black trousers—the same as that day he and Dahlia had run into each other in town. They had met many times since she’d seen him in that outfit, yet it brought back good memories.

“Not a problem, Volf. You’re just in time for the toast,” she said.

“Hm, let’s see. Out of everyone here, I believe Mena is the only one you have yet to meet.” Ivano called out to Mena, who was at the window at the back of the room chatting with Lucia. When he came over, his river-blue eyes grew wide.

“I am Volfred Scalfarotto, one of the guarantors of the company.”

“So you’re Sir Scalfarotto...?” Mena’s strained muttering held much resentment—perhaps even a hint of melancholy—and the daggers he shot took Volf aback. Dahlia was just as discomfited. “That’s just unfair...”

Marcella approached them. “Dahlia, Volf, what’s wrong?” He couldn’t have seen Mena’s expression from his angle, but he must’ve noticed something was amiss. The others looked this way as well.

“Um, Mena, is something the matter?” she asked.

He took a deep breath and settled himself. “My deepest apologies for my rudeness. Seeing Sir Scalfarotto in the flesh made me lose my composure,” he said. “My name is Mezzena Grieve and I work for the company. Please call me Mena.”

“You can call me Volf as well. I do believe this is the first time we’ve met?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Your reputation precedes you, Sir Scalfarotto; I have heard things—that you are the handsomest man in the capital, that even men stop and stare at you—and now I am inclined to believe all those things. I envy you, and it is a privilege to meet you.”

“I don’t appreciate it, but thank you anyway.” Volf pulled his lips into the shape of a smile, but his words were unusually sharp. Still, he no longer seemed defensive, as he had been earlier.

“Sorry ’bout that, Volf,” Marcella said, intervening. “Mena, ease off, will ya? And besides, you’re up there in looks anyway.”

“Please, I can’t even compare. People may speak to me when I’m out and about, but I’m sure Sir Scalfarotto has a hard time even going outside.”

Volf kept silent, but an iciness oozed from his every pore. Mena may have had good intentions, but that was what the road to hell was paved with. It was only now, at long last, that Volf could walk around the capital, dine out, and enjoy food stalls; there was no chance he took Mena’s words well.

Before she knew it, Dahlia was chastising her new hire. “That’s enough, Mena. You are being very impolite to Volf.”

“I apologize, chairwoman. I will do better in the future.”

Someone had to break the silence that his apology brought on, and it was none other than Ivano. “All right, now that we have everyone, time for the toast!”

Everyone in the room was an adult; there was no need to dredge anything up again. Nevertheless, Dahlia remained anxious, and she called out to Volf as they moved to the table. “Sorry, Volf.”

“It’s not your fault, so don’t worry about it. It reminds me of my first time meeting Dorino, actually.”

“Did he talk like that too?”

“Not exactly the same words, but he behaved similarly the first time we had drinks.” His laugh was a bit strained, but those golden eyes narrowed in a

genuine smile, lacking any anger. “It doesn’t bother me any more since you made me these,” Volf said, pulling a leather eyeglass case out of his breast pocket. Once his eyes turned green, he could do as he liked in public. That smile of his was enough to make her proud, and she couldn’t help but smile too.

“Not only do we have the Rossetti Company’s new start to celebrate, but Fermo will be founding the Gandolfi Company!” announced Ivano.

“You’re starting your own business, Fermo? Congratulations!”

“As of moments ago, apparently I am. Thank you, Sir Volf.” Not even thirty minutes had passed; hopefully celebrating early would act as a good luck charm.

As they chatted, their glasses had been filled with a sparkling wine that glimmered gold—a gorgeous color befitting the occasion. When everyone held up their own glasses, Ivano asked, “A toast, Sir Volf?”

“Wait, me?”

“If you please. A veteran member of the company would be ideal, and you were there from the beginning. And if you’ll forgive me for saying so, I believe you are more than just a guarantor. Rather, you’re the deftest salesman by the chairwoman’s side. Could I please have you do the honors?” It was an odd way to put it, but Ivano wasn’t so incorrect.

Volf must’ve found it funny too, and he agreed with a cackling laugh. “To the Rossetti Trading Company starting anew, to the birth of the Gandolfi Company, and to everyone’s prosperity—cheers!”

“To prosperity!”

“To new beginnings!”

Soft voices and rowdy voices all intermingled, with the percussion of colliding glassware setting the tempo. Little was as delicious as everyone’s smiles while they sipped their golden wine.

When everyone had emptied their glasses, the waitstaff came by with dry-salted chèvre and rye. The bread was cut up for sharing among everyone at the

table—the breaking of bread symbolizing togetherness and amity. It was the first time Dahlia had had it. The slight funk from the goat milk; the rich, salty tang of the cheese; the creaminess when it melted in the mouth—all paired well with the rye bread. She almost wished each piece were bigger, but it was perfect with a drink or as an hors d'oeuvre.

In the center of the table was a platter of meat, seafood, deep-fried vegetables, baked shellfish that resembled mussels, and smoked chicken and sausages. On the drinks cart were red and white wine, a cloudy estervino, and squash, available for the party to freely choose. Each place setting also had two dishes in front of it: a porcelain plate and a skillet resting on a wooden board. Atop the plate was a colorful arrangement consisting of a small serving of beautifully arranged pasta—red and white, likely cream and tomato—meatballs, and roasted vegetable mash. On the skillet was a thick-cut slab of meat, so red that the diners would wonder if it had been cooked at all.

Dahlia turned to Volf—who was looking at her and about to open his mouth too—and asked, “Do you think this is crimson beef?”

“Yeah, I’d wager so.” The somewhat special steak was what they had had the first time they came to this restaurant. Crimson cattle were a kind of bovine monster that Ordine’s neighbor had managed to domesticate as livestock.

As the others eyed the vividly red meat with suspicion, the assistant manager entered with a saucière still billowing steam. “We have a crimson veal tenderloin with foraged mushroom sauce this evening. Do be careful, as it will be very hot.” He went around to serve each patron; the aroma of mushroom filled the room when the sauce hit the hot metal skillets. “Enjoy. If you require anything else, please ring the bell at any time,” the assistant manager said before he and the waitstaff left the diners.

“Thank you all very much for joining us tonight, and please eat and drink to your heart’s content.” After the chairwoman began the meal, everybody, with their choice of drink, clinked glasses again.

Time was of the essence, and Dahlia slid her knife into the steak. Even with her two lifespans, she didn’t recall ever having veal before and wondered how different it would be from other red meat. Unfortunately, a scene of cute baby

cows swaying in the back of a wagon was playing out in her head over a soundtrack of dejected mooing. But there was a time for compassion and it was not now. She pierced the meat with her fork and brought a piece without sauce to her mouth. It was incredibly fine-grained, contributing to a very mellow first bite. As she chewed, Dahlia was surprised by its tenderness, sweetness, and juiciness. It was not gamy, nor was it greasy—simple yet delicious. Her second bite was with the accoutrement; the fragrant minced mushrooms shone through the red wine base, highly complementing the rustic flavor of the veal.

“Gosh, it’s so tender and sweet...”

“The meat is good, but with that sauce? Mm. I could knock back a few more glasses of wine.”

“Is it so good because it’s crimson beef or because it’s veal?”

“I’m not too sure about that, but what I know is that it’s delectable!”

As everyone else took a bite, the steak got rave reviews. In fact, everyone ended up ordering seconds aside from Fermo and Dahlia; she abstained due to growing concerns about her dress’s waist. All seven of them savored their food and drink while filling themselves with conversation about the happenings within the guilds, current fashion trends in the capital, and products like the camp stove, interrupted intermittently when extra helpings of dessert and snacks arrived.

There was one thing that weighed on Dahlia’s mind: Mena; she had spoken to him more harshly than she’d wanted to. She looked over to him, and his aqua eyes looked over at the same time. The glass in his hand said that he was halfway through one of many glasses of wine, but his face said nothing about his sobriety or lack thereof.

“This party is to welcome newcomers too, so drink as much as you’d like, okay?”

“Thank you, chairwoman, I’ll do just that,” he said with a smile that eased her anxiety somewhat. It seemed like he was thinking about the same thing. “And sorry about earlier! I didn’t mean to get so jealous and run my mouth.”

“You’re fine. Just make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Marcella, beside him, turned this way too. “You know I’m brand spankin’ new too, right, Dahlia?”

“I figured I didn’t need to say anything to get you to drink up, Marcella.”

“True. I gotta get my fill, since I haven’t been drinking at home.”

“Does the smell bother Irma?” Perhaps morning sickness had hit her already.

But Marcella shook his head. “Nah, not at all. It doesn’t really feel right to drink when she can’t have any for the next li’l while. I mean, she told me not to stop on account of her, but it’s better to stay sober anyway, just in case. But it *is* bottoms up for me right now, since her folks are over takin’ care of her.”

“Heh, you’re going to be a great dad, Marcella.”

“I can tell he’s going to be a loving, caring father.”

“Oh, shush, you two. You’re going to make me blush...” Marcella said, already blushing as he ran his hand through his hair. He was hard to tease when he looked so genuinely happy about being a father, though.

“Are you having wine, Ms. Lucia? The squash is really good too; you ought to try some.”

“Wine! The red kind! And I’m fine. I can drink more than ever thanks to Mr. Forto, I’ll have you know,” she said. As her glass was empty, Mena brought over both bottles, but Lucia refused his suggestion that she have the non-alcoholic option. Dahlia had her doubts about the Tailors’ guildmaster Forto teaching Lucia but decided not to inquire further. Lucia, now equipped with a glass half full of wine, turned to Dahlia with a mischievous smile on her face. “Get this! Earlier today, Mr. Forto looked real bummed out, right? And so I said to him, ‘I bet it’s because Dahlia didn’t invite you to her party,’ and guess what? He whimpered like a puppy!”

“Ungh!” Hearing her friend’s story sent Dahlia’s drink down the wrong pipe; to her left, Volf appeared concerned for her, and to her right, Ivano wore a strained smile as she coughed. “I would have wanted to invite Mr. Forto too, but perhaps next time; I’m sure others would be nervous in his presence.”

“Mr. Forto as in the master of the Tailors’ Guild and viscount? I think I would prefer to wait outside in that case...”

“I don’t think my manners are up to snuff either...”

“Noble etiquette is a real doozy, all right...” Mena, Fermo, and Marcella all furrowed their brows.

Dahlia had to concur as well. “I completely understand...”

“I hope you three gentlemen have not forgotten that Sir Volf is a noble as well, and in a year’s time, so too will our chairwoman!” Ivano jested. Her choking had stopped already, but he kick-started it right up again by bringing something like that up. Now it was Volf who had a strained smile.

“That’s a different story; Dahlia and Volf won’t say nothin’ if I slip up.”

Mena seemed a little surprised at his friend. “Oh, that’s interesting. I hadn’t noticed, Marcella, but you call Sir Volf by just his first name, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, that’s ’cause we’re friends.”

“We go out drinking together from time to time.”

Mena whipped a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and bit it, saying, “Oh, Marcella! You scoundrel! Was I not enough for you?!”

“Man, cut that out! Every time you pull out that gag, people laugh, but only to be polite, y’know? Besides, I don’t want to hear that from nobody ’cept from Irma.”

“That’s our Marcella, always gushing about his darling.”

“‘*Our* Marcella’? I ain’t yours, buddy...”

“By that I meant we’re all part of the Rossetti Trading Company, of course. What did you think I meant?” Mena said deadpan, folding his handkerchief back up.

Marcella shut his kite-brown eyes and let his shoulders slump. “Ugh, sorry, Dahlia. Can I take back my referral of that weirdo?”

“No, erm, I mean, he has great energy, doesn’t he?”

“The kindest chairwoman in all the land! I shall follow you to the ends of the

world, or at least until your delayed retirement!” Mena bellowed a cordial laugh.

“I’ll do my best to make sure the company thrives for that long,” she said. Dahlia had never been in charge of anyone before, not even in her previous life. She had asked Ivano to be vice-chairman as a contingency, but that wasn’t enough; she knew she had to study harder as a magical toolmaker and a chairwoman, and that was only the beginning of it.

Volf, with glass in hand, interrupted her musings. “Dahlia, you *are* our chairwoman, after all, so you ought to enjoy yourself tonight too.” His golden eyes must have seen through her slight unease, and his enthusiasm made her just a little embarrassed.

“Your attention please! Preparations for next year’s release of zephyricloth are already underway, and our target is to produce a hundred times more than this year by next summer!” Lucia’s voice was just a little louder and higher than usual; if that wasn’t a sign of her declining sobriety, then the emptied wine glass in her hand was.

“That’s fantastic news!” Ivano replied. “The Magical Garment Factory is hard at work, I see.”

“You bet! We’ve got undergarments for knights and lining for noblewomen’s dresses, but we’re aiming to get a piece of zephyricloth into commoners’ hands by summertime too!”

Hearing that her invention would be brought to the mass market tickled Dahlia pink. But a hundred times the output? That would be a huge number, and the people producing it must have been toiling.

“Zephyricloth is that fabric that cools ya, right? I bet the boys back at the Couriers’ would love some when it gets hot,” Marcella said.

The other ex-courier asked, “Is it progressing smoothly, Ms. Lucia?”

“Yup! The researchers at the Tailors’ Guild have found a way to make it more durable and last three times longer too. Right now, they’re figuring out if they can make the enchantment easier to strip and if they can put multiple

enchancements on. The people at the slime nursery are working hard too, so I think everything should be on time. Crafting the zephyricloth should be a bit easier too, now that we've hired more workers," she said. "But I heard it's not going all that great for the ones in charge of the castle, since they only let nobles handle that work. They might even start handing out titles sooner or later."

Mena burst out laughing. "Handing out titles?! Well, that's just grand!" However, it might be no laughing matter. To make deliveries to the castle, one needed a personal reference; that was to say nothing about the load of inspections needed for design, comfort, safety, and whatnot.

"The Magical Garment Factory is quite something," Dahlia said.

"What are you talking about? The Rossetti Trading Company is an infinitely bigger name. When I go to the guildhall, people ask me about you and your company every time, you know?"

"Huh? Me?"

Simultaneously, Ivano put in, "What do they ask you, Ms. Lucia?"

"Things like what the inventor of the zephyricloth, the toe socks, the insole, and chairwoman of the Rossetti Company is like."

"Ah, I see they have learned that you and Ms. Dahlia are friends."

"Mm-hmm. But it's not like I've been hiding it either, since it's all because of Dahlia that I'm head manager right now. That's why I tell them all about how diligent and skilled she is at her craft and how she's a magical toolmaker through and through."

"Through and—" Before Volf could finish repeating her words, Marcella and Fermo voiced their agreement. It wasn't as though Lucia had said anything wrong, but Dahlia, as a fledgling, was embarrassed to be praised so highly.

"They even asked about Mr. Ivano, and so I told them you were a quick-thinking and loyal businessman who's close with Mr. Forto!"

"Oh, erm, thank you very much..." After Ivano gave his thanks, Dahlia heard him mutter the last four words of Lucia's sentence then press his finger to his

forehead. Some things were better left unmentioned.

Lucia continued, “All the companies in the Tailors’ Guild rent the huge warehouses before winter, but the Rossetti Company has had them booked since this summer. Of course you’re going to be the talk of the town.”

“Oh, that’s for the shoe-dryers, materials, and parts. Two large warehouses weren’t quite enough and we had to supplement them with whatever space we could find.” Before they knew it, the company had been renting more and more warehouse space. In the winter, shoes got wet and stayed wet, so people placed big orders for them before the weather turned cold and damp.

“Never mind warehouse space, we have outgrown our room in the guildhall too—we have run out of space for all our documents,” added Mena. And of course he was right—just the other day, all their files had tumbled out of their shelf like an avalanche. All the boxes lying around were piling up as well. There just wasn’t enough floor space.

“How about constructing yourselves a four-story building in the West District soon, Chairwoman Dahlia?” Fermo suggested with a big grin that contrasted with his expression earlier.

Something like that would surely be too big for their needs, Dahlia was about to say, before Volf spoke up. “The company is registered to my address, so why not just move there? We have extra rooms and my brother’s blessings too.” The Rossetti Trading Company officially operated out of the Scalfarotto family villa and not the Green Tower; Dahlia, being a single woman, lived alone. Having double the shelving and space to put boxes of smaller magical tools would indeed be very helpful, and they would have twice the rooms too. However, Dahlia worried about how nervous she’d be visiting Volf’s mansion every day and how he’d probably only take a nominal sum for rent.

Suddenly, Ivano beamed. “Indeed. You should just move into the villa, chairwoman.”

“Hmph.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I make all my magical tools out of my workshop in the tower.” It *would* be very convenient to work and craft out of the same building, but home was the Green Tower and home was where she was most comfortable

crafting. Besides, judging by the shocked look on Volf's face, he must not have even thought about making that offer.

"Wow. And here I thought that was too on th' nose..."

"You and me both..." Fermo and Mena were commiserating, but Dahlia couldn't follow their conversation.

Ivano continued, "Any other news from your side, Ms. Lucia?"

"Right now we've got our hands full between pumping out zephyricloth and the winter collection and planning our spring collection, but once we get over the bulk of it, I'm hoping to get out designer undies and sexy lingerie. I wouldn't need zephyricloth for that kind of thing, but I want to make it so that anyone can enjoy them, regardless of their social status or gender."

"You think commoners are going to go for flashy, expensive underwear? Might be a bit of a hurdle, 'specially for us men," Fermo said, voicing his concerns.

"Just because someone's a commoner doesn't mean they have to be so modest with their style in this day and age! And don't you think it's kinda messed up that men *have* to wear plain ol' underwear? Aren't you guys tired of wearing the same designs and colors all the time?"

Dahlia thought Fermo might be at a loss when pressured by Lucia like that, but he replied, "Can't say that I am, to be quite honest."

"Think about it! In this nation, in this age, we're all free to wear what we want! And I want to make things that people want to wear! Sure, plain is safe and modest is popular, but variety is the spice of life, don't you think? Don't you want to experiment with what goes on your body?"

"Ah, like clothes, like lingerie, then, Head Manager Fano?"

"Yes! You get it, Mr. *Grill!*" Lucia was definitely buzzed if not drunk already.

He chuckled at her mistake. "Both 'Mezzena' and 'Grieve' might be a little difficult to pronounce, so please call me Mena, Head Manager Fano."

"All right, you call me Lucia too. And you don't need to be so stiff and formal either—I only landed my job because one thing led to another. I'm just a

commoner too.”

“I’ll take you up on your offer, then, Ms. Lucia.” They must’ve found kindred spirits in each other.

Fermo didn’t seem convinced. “But still, underwear? It’s not like yer showing ‘em off to anyone.”

“There *is* a time and place for that too, you know! And you of all people should understand that packaging matters, Chairman *Gandoly*!”

“Well, everything from the design of the item to the box it comes in is very important. You have a point,” he said, conceding. “And you’re better off calling me Fermo too, since ‘Gandolfi’ is a mouthful.”

“Mr. Fermo! You call me Lucy then!”

“L-Lucy...” Fermo pressed the bridge of his nose, shoulders trembling from suppressed laughter.

“There you go!” He and Lucia had grown closer too. “I knew you’d understand in terms of packaging. Like for example, it’d be a huge difference whether your sweetheart or wife had on a frilly white negligee versus a black camisole!”

“Lucia!” Dahlia shouted. *Hold on! Is she really going to talk about this stuff in front of all the men?* She expected someone to stop Lucia or to just laugh it off, but everybody else was considering the topic at hand with full seriousness.

“Hm. That’s a huge difference, all right.”

“Yes, quite.”

“Ivano... Mr. Fermo...” Dahlia was at a loss for words other than calling out their names.

Lucia’s dayflower eyes had a glassy sheen—she was hammered. “Dahliaaaa, shush! This is serious business; I need their opinions.”

“Oh. R-Right.” There was no stopping her, so Dahlia might as well escape the conversation.

“Well, pieces that match her hair or eye color are go-tos,” Fermo said.

“Of course. Black and white are standard, but I prefer a light color that

matches the wearer.”

“I agree with Mr. Ivano,” added Mena. “Personally, I also enjoy tops with a deep lace neck that offers a quick glance once in a while.”

“Mena! Tell me more! In detail!”

Now that he had her attention, he fed Lucia his pet theory. “How about a plunging neckline like this on the chest and a layer of lace across the back, paired with slit leg pants like those from across the border, so maybe it would reveal just a little when she walks by—”

“Hold it! I need to draw this!” Lucia rummaged through her bag for her small sketchbook, then started noting down and drawing what Mena continued to describe in obsessive detail, like collarbones and thighs. With how good her sketches are, no one would think she was drunk.

Mena might have been better off loaned to the Tailors’ Guild. “Oh, and the ribbon should be fixed in place too!”

“I think that’s enough from you, Mena...” Marcella’s voice was oddly terrifying.

“Hm? But isn’t this the kind of thing you buy for Irma all the time? I could’ve sworn it’s to your ta—”

“Another word and I’ll kill you!” he barked as he squashed Mena’s head between his giant hands.

“You’re *already* killing me!”

No one attempted to put a stop to it, not even Dahlia; she was just happy to sip her wine and wait for the topic to blow over. Volf was similarly silent as he refilled her glass.

“Bold lingerie like that isn’t so bad, but a white blouse and navy skirt? That’s a winning combination,” said Ivano.

Fermo nodded. “Can’t go wrong with the classics, like a simple one-piece dress tied at the shoulders.”

“And hair tied up to reveal her nape?”

“Short hair’s not bad either.” The two of them continued on to hairstyles.

“But if we’re speaking of pure lethality, a white dress on a rainy day really gets me...”

“I see your point, but if she were to wear my dress shirt? Absolutely kills me every time.”

“Hm. Unexpected.” Ivano and Fermo were sitting shoulder to shoulder, but they must’ve been drunk too, and they weren’t exactly quiet voicing their opinions.

Lucia interrupted, saying, “Sir Volf! What are your tastes, Sir Volf?”

“I’m, erm, not too fussy about ‘packaging.’” He fixed his gaze on his glass, seemingly more interested in his white wine than the topic at hand.

What did he mean by that anyway? He doesn’t care about the clothes but what’s underneath? I mean, sure, that’s important too, but he still has to have a preference. A dull ache came to her head. Why was she so curious about what Volf liked? She chalked it up to the alcohol too, and she thought she’d better go sober up and calm down. “I’m, um, going outside for a bit.”

“Daaahliaaaaa! Come on! I know a lot has happened, but don’t be a square; try to keep an open mind about the different points of view! Girl talk and guy talk are different, you know? You’ll learn about what people find attractive, and maybe it’ll even help you to make good magical tools.”

“Maybe...” What her friend said was painfully true. It wasn’t as though Dahlia didn’t get it, but she wasn’t very keen on this kind of talk.

“Besides, you never talk about your love life or anything. You might have been engaged once, but it’s almost as if you’ve never fallen in love ever before.”

“I—” She couldn’t refute it, but admitting it would be so much more embarrassing. Shutting up wasn’t much of a fun choice either, as everyone would worry about her feelings. Not only would it be embarrassing to talk about romantic love, she couldn’t, as it wasn’t something she understood or had experienced.

“Have you ever seen anyone wearing anything that you thought was really

cool or attractive? You don't have to talk about undies, of course."

"Not really."

"You don't even have a time when you thought something looked super nice on someone?"

An answer did come to Dahlia's mind. Volf looked really dashing in his uniform and armor, but she couldn't bring herself to say that aloud. He looked good in his usual clothes too, but that wasn't the problem—she was too shy to tell the world she was thinking of Volf. There was one other person, however. "When someone is working really hard in their work clothes?"

"Wait. Just who are you thinking of, Dahlia?" Lucia squinted at her.

"My father," Dahlia confessed.

The whole room fell silent, at least until Lucia began smacking the table. "I can't believe you! What are you, five?! You've *got* to have at least one or two people who you think are really dazzling! Anyone else would've been a better answer than Mr. Carlo, even Tobias..."

"Why do you want me to give you a name so badly? I can't help it if I can't think of anyone else! Can *you* come up with someone who you think is 'really dazzling'?"

"Of course I can!" Lucia tightened her right hand into a fist. "Mr. Forto in his special three-piece that he only wears to the castle. The way it's tailored so well, it makes him look so refined when he moves around. He'd look great in a knight's uniform too. Sometimes when it's hot out, he'll wear an odd hemp shirt that totally transforms his aura. When it's fall and it gets a little chillier, the off-white dress shirts he wears are very stylish too. His fingers are long and pretty, so gloves fit him great. I'm excited for winter, as I'm sure he'll be stunning in a coat and boots too. I'm so fascinated by how he makes everything he wears look good."

"Lucia..." Was it adoration? Admiration? Whatever it was, the guildmaster and nobleman was already married; Lucia could pine forever yet nothing would be reciprocated.

"Oh, and how about the guards at the Tailors' Guild? They're *fine*, even when

they're just standing around. Have you noticed their pocket squares are always a different color every day? Oh, I can't wait to see their winter jackets! And the assistant manager at the Magical Factory Garment! Super chic when he pairs lighter and darker olive greens with his suit. And this person who works there too. Such a great figure with long arms and legs, and always wearing cute but mature outfits!" Lucia continued. "And how about Mr. Fermo's suit? It has so much presence! Double-breasted is the way to go for him. As for Mr. Ivano, a three-piece makes you so handsome. I can tell Mr. Forto's had a hand!"

"Oh, Lucia." Dahlia took back all of the heartbreak she felt for her friend. This was just on-brand for Lucia, after all; everyone else seemed to understand too, as they all had smiles on their faces.

"Thank you very much for the kind words, Ms. Lucia. You really do like clothes," said Ivano.

"Like them? I love them! But at the end of the day, you need to have a good foundation to build a good house," Lucia answered with her usual chipper attitude. "Looking good for the occasion is important, but the clothes have to match the person and make them happy wearing them. When I make clothes, I imagine how happy someone would be to put them on." The seamstress's words resonated with Dahlia.

"A very good point. Like in business, there must be at least two parties to make a transaction, but the best deal is made when both buyer and seller are happy making it."

"I see, I see. Without the end users, the things we make are nothing but prototypes. If people are gonna use them, I want them to be happy when they do."

As the men ruminated on their respective crafts, Marcella handed Lucia a glass of the squash. "And here I thought you were all about the outside and not the inside, Lucia."

"Marcella! How rude! I'm going to tell on you to Irma."

"I'm sure she'd agree with me, actually," he quipped.

"But will my daughters tell me how sharply dressed I am..."

“Your daughters already say when you have your three-piece on, I bet. I’ve got all boys meself,” Fermo said.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s in the cards for me either.”

“What are you talking about, Marcella? Give it another ten years and you’ll be in the same shoes one day. ‘Oh, daddy, you’re so handsome!’”

“That’s it, Mena, you’re dead meat!” he snapped back. Mena didn’t seem to understand that his words could lead to disaster, and Marcella crushed him in his grip again—albeit around the shoulders this time. Like last time, no one lifted a hand to save him.

As laughter, conversation, and the occasional yelping suffused the room, Volf muttered, “There wouldn’t be an Order of Beast Hunters if monsters didn’t show up, but maybe it’d help both sides if we weren’t needed...” No monsters, no hunters. But even if that were the case, adventurers would likely still venture out to hunt monsters for materials.

“That’s true. It’d be a lot more peaceful for everyone.”

“I’d be out of a job, though.”

“There will always be a job for you here at the Rossetti Trading Company. I’m waiting with open arms.” She hadn’t intended to say it so seriously, but Dahlia meant every word of it, even if that would be a little disrespectful to current Beast Hunter Volf of Earldom Scalfarotto.

Before she could apologize, his lips curved into a big U-shape—one of the most beautiful smiles he’d ever shown her, if not *the* most beautiful. “If I ever quit the squad, I’ll be in your hands, Chairwoman Rossetti.”



Interlude: The Black Leather Gloves

With a cloth-wrapped bottle of estervino in his hands, Marcella peered out of the window of the carriage he was riding. The dripping and dropping rain plunged him without warning into memories of the time when his magic had belatedly bloomed—the day he'd learned things he wished he never had.

Marcella was born and molded by the seedy part of town. Nuvolari was his family name, a common one in the royal capital. His father was a carpenter, his mother a washerwoman, he had two younger brothers, and he never had a quiet moment in the house. He had always been big, even when he was in the womb—soon after becoming pregnant, his mother had been unable to move, and she gave birth at her family home outside of the city. The delivery had been difficult and the recovery hadn't been any easier, apparently.

When he was old enough, Marcella had been put in elementary school. As his grades were far from stellar but his physical strength was exceptional, he had decided to find work that would make the best of his talents. He had wanted to become a carpenter like his father, but his big, clumsy hands meant that his brothers had been chosen to take on the family business instead. By chance, as he was making pocket money doing deliveries, an employee of the Couriers' Guild had reached out to him. Since he loved to move around and his body strengthening spell meant that carrying heavy items was a breeze, Marcella had accepted the job on the spot.

Right after graduating elementary school, he had become a trainee at the Couriers'. To become a full member of the guild, he had learned to tie knots, pile loads, carry cargo, take care of horses and wagons, and take stock of the lay of the land. Newbies had generally been assigned to running trips between warehouses and the Merchants' Guild and unloading cargo, but Marcella, like any other newbie, had wished for the chance to drive out of the city.

One fateful day, as Marcella was about to do his usual warehouse runs, one of

the supervisors had flagged him down. “Marcella, sorry for the sudden change of plans, but I need you to go with Giusi on a run along the western highway.” Marcella’s more experienced coworker had originally been the one scheduled, but last night, his wife had given birth earlier than expected. It had been a joyous cause, and so Marcella had gladly accepted to be the replacement.

Tears welled in the clouds hung in the sky the day he set off from the guildhall with Giusi. The older man’s hair was gray and his brow was entrenched with wrinkles, yet he was still an active courier, loading and unloading cargo like everyone else. In fact, he could carry three bags of grain without breaking a sweat; his body strengthening must have been quite powerful. “Rook. Knot’s loose.”

“I’ll retie it right away, sir.” That was what Giusi was like—he was infamous for calling all newbies “rooks” and for being a standoffish hard-ass; many of the newcomers, fed up with him, were already celebrating his retirement next year.

By noon, the duo reached a coaching inn village. They delivered their cargo, fed and watered the horses, then did the same to themselves. In the midst of loading the wagon with crates of produce for the journey home, Giusi fell to his knees and went rigid.

“Giusi!”

“Quit yer yappin’... Grrrgh, my back!” He suffered from a terrible strained back but adamantly refused a potion and instead opted for some painkillers. Hoping to give him some rest, Marcella laid the old man down in the back of the wagon bed and covered him with a blanket.

Marcella took the reins and drove the wagon on the return trip—an exciting affair for a fresh recruit like himself. However, before they’d even gotten halfway, the heavens opened up; he draped a waxed canvas coat over his shoulders and cursed the skies. It was at that very moment a bear cub jumped out onto the road, which sent both colts into an uncontrollable frenzy. The panicking horses took the wagon off the main highway and onto a small path, but, as luck would have it, there was a big drop in the middle.

“Aaargh!” The first thing Marcella saw after falling off the box seat was the coach tipping over onto him, and for a moment, the world was still. *Ah, so this is*

what dying is like. It was a wagon drawn by a pair of horses; getting trapped underneath meant no chances of escape.

Ka-THUNK! the wagon came crashing down. His arms were trembling, yet he managed to just barely prevent the side of the wagon from pinning him down.

“Marcella! You okay?!” Giusi crawled down from the bed, calling his name. He received no response; Marcella could not afford to speak. Giusi dragged himself to the young man’s side and tried to push the wagon upright, but try as they might, physics was not on their side; no strengthening spell was a match for two horses and a fully loaded bed. “I’ll pull the horses forw—no, that’ll only make matters worse.” Having the horses pull the wagon would only break Marcella’s grip and crush him. Instead, the old man struggled for dear life to soothe the horses and somehow succeeded.

The leaning wagon got heavier by the moment, pressing against his chest harder and harder, and Marcella’s elbows creaked. He knew he was dead. *But if I kick the bucket, ma and pops are going to bawl their eyes out. My brothers and friends are gonna cry too. And imagine the paperwork my new bosses are going to have to deal with. I wouldn’t want to saddle them with all that.* There was so much he wanted to do. He wanted to go on another fish-off with his friends; he’d only lost once so far. He hadn’t been able to bring his parents to a slightly upscale restaurant in the Central District yet. He was waiting for his middle brother to become a carpenter and build them a new house, and his baby brother was going to become a woodworker and make all the new furniture. Marcella hadn’t even gone on a date with a cute girl yet, let alone fulfilled his dreams of getting married one day—if only his face were a little softer and less scary!

“Hey! Marcella! I’m gonna slide in there; get yourself out!” Giusi shouted, to Marcella’s confusion.

An absurd proposal, but the situation was too dire for Marcella to respond. He would have loved to, but he was clenching down with all his might; blood was even seeping out of his mouth. The wagon, now almost fully on top of him, became even heavier.

“C’mon, kid! Don’t make an old man like me outlive you! Crawl outta there,

rook!” Giusi shouted again, having already slid in without Marcella’s approval. His back had yet to heal, and he did his best despite screaming out in pain.

Marcella was only a rook to him, and they were little more than strangers; there was absolutely no reason for them to trade lives. *You’re only a year away from kicking back and enjoying the retirement life.* Just what was Giusi thinking? “Stop treating me like a goddamned rookie!”

For a split second, Marcella’s body burst open—or at least he imagined it did. It felt like a flame had engulfed him from head to toe. His rage and confusion made him scream aloud. “Graaaaagh!” As if commanded by his voice, rock pillars shot out of the ground beside Marcella and Giusi, knocking the wagon back upright.

“Huh?”

“Whuh?”

The two men, with their backs still on the ground, voiced their stupefaction. The wagon had disappeared from their vision. They stared at each other—one, two—then roared in laughter. Giusi then took his emergency bottle of potion out of his hip pouch, and they each downed half of it.

Both men sat on the box and drove back to the capital as the downpour turned into a drizzle. “Didn’t know you had earth magic,” said Giusi.

Marcella drew a blank. “Huh?”

“Them pillars shot out beside us—that was earth magic. What, ain’t never used it before?”

“Oh, is that what it was?”

“Case of late-bloomin’ magic, then. I’ll chalk it up to good fortune. And that don’t seem like grade four magic to me either; ya need at least seven to lift up the wagon like ya did. With that power, you’d earn big coin were you to work for a noble.”

“No, being all stiff and proper isn’t for me. I like where I’m at now.” To be honest, it was exciting making deliveries to nobles in their fancy mansions, seeing things that he’d never seen before—giant, beautiful gardens; finely

chiseled pavers; fluffy carpeting; huge refrigerated rooms... But that was like sightseeing—nice to visit but wouldn't want to live there.

"Many in your family with earth magic?"

"No, not a single..." Halfway through his sentence, Marcella realized his family and relatives had air magic, water magic, and body strengthening spells. Not a single one of them knew earth magic. His father had sandy hair and dark gray eyes. His mother had chestnut hair and pale green eyes. His brothers, sand and green. His grandparents, too, had sandy hair and dark gray eyes. As far as he remembered, none of his blood relatives had reddish-brown eyes. *Where did my earth magic come from? Who did I get my eyes from?*

"My bad. Looks like I got you thinkin' 'bout nothin' good. Forget it."

"No, I—"

"Ain't never thought 'bout it before, have you? No point startin' now. Remember that you've got folks who raised you, loved you." As Marcella was lost in thought, Giusi draped his coat over the younger man's shoulders—his own had gotten shredded while he was trapped under the wagon. "Keep it on ya. It's still cold. Don't want you spittin' up blood again."

There were a few rounds back and forth—*I'm younger than you* and *Just keep it on*—before Giusi snapped. "Just wear th' damn jacket, boy! I got my fair share of help when I was young, and you will too!"

"You were helped how?"

The old man paused. "One time when I was comin' back from deliverin' medicine to somewhere along th' border, a forest serpent popped out. A senior of ours stuffed me and another guy in the wagon, then pretended he was gonna run off into the brush alone. Him and th' horses got swallowed whole."

The forest serpent, or the Green King. Rarely would you encounter one on the highway or in the forest, but as soon as you do, ditch your cargo and horses, keep running, and don't look back—so they had drilled into Marcella when he was a trainee. Back when Giusi was a young man, monsters and beasts had had a stronger control of the highways than they did now. More so than now, couriers had put their lives on the line for their duty.

“You tie your knots loose, then you have to restack your cargo. You restack your cargo, you’re defenseless. You slack off and don’t check your wagon wheels, something goes wrong, and you’re in danger. Just because you’re close to the capital doesn’t mean you’re safe,” a veteran courier had once said to Marcella. He finally understood the gravity of those words.

“Thank you so much for saving my life, Giusi.”

“If anythin’, you saved my hide, *Marcella*. Thank you.”

“Hey, you used my name!”

“Weren’t you the one who told me to stop treating you like a goddamned rookie?!” he shouted back. “I’ll take care of the cargo; you head straight to the temple to get fixed up. And while yer there, talk to them about yer late-bloomin’ magic, Marcella.”

“All right...” Marcella obediently agreed, the heavy waxed canvas coat still weighing on his shoulders.

“Forget it,” Giusi had told him, but Marcella found that to be an impossibility. When he got to the temple, the priest revealed his injuries were beyond a potion’s power and that he needed medical treatment. The biting rain hadn’t helped either; his very thoughts pounded in his head. Marcella was burning a high fever, and when he was conscious, his mother and father were by his bedside in his small room in the temple. They looked awfully worried for him, but that muddled his head even more.

“Marcella! You all right?”

“Marcella! Would you like a drink of water? Are you hungry?”

He didn’t have an answer for the onslaught of questions and instead responded with a question of his own—a pointless, unnecessary question.

“Say...” Marcella began. “Who are my real ma and pops?”

“What?! Who else is your pops but me, you idiot?!” he bellowed instantly.

Well, of course he is. What a silly question. I shouldn’t have asked that. Marcella was about to laugh it off until he saw the tears streaming down his

mother's face.

"I am your mom, Marcella, but"—she paused, mustering up all that she had to continue—"you also have another..."

She was his ma. He believed it. But the words that came out of her seemed so, so sad.

Bit by bit, his parents gave him the full story of his birth mother and father. The one who had given birth to Marcella was his pop's elder sister, meaning his ma and pops were his aunt and uncle by blood.

When her father and brother had been infected by an epidemic, Marcella's birth mother had begun working in the red-light district to afford their medicine. They had then recovered, but she'd continued working while she trained to be a hair stylist, saving money for her dream of opening her own salon. But one day, out of the blue, she had visited her brother and sister-in-law—that is to say, Marcella's ma and pops—sharing news that she was pregnant. She had said that she couldn't currently see this man who promised they would get married but that she loved this child and was going to give birth to her baby.

Marcella's mother had been adamant about two things: refusing to reveal who the father was and giving birth to her baby. And so they had decided to discuss her future plans instead. To avoid unsavory rumors circulating in the neighborhood, they decided that it would be best to move back to the family home in the countryside, where goats outnumbered people. The very next day, after giving birth to the baby boy, she had passed away. Marcella's ma and pops had then raised and loved him like their own. The more they told him, the sorrier they were.

Marcella, fighting back his fever, moaned out another question. "You didn't ever feel like you were raisin' the bastard child of this dumb broad who got suckered?"

"You really are an idiot, boy! It was my sister who saved me when I was sick. It was my sister who loved you so very much, she would always be talkin' to you while you were in her belly."

"That's right, Marcella. She was a wonderful woman who overflowed with joy

and positivity. She never once said a bad thing about your birth father, you know?" But at the end of the day, the guy had skipped town, hadn't he?

"My sister waited and waited for her man to show up. That's why she gave you her own name, in hopes that he would come looking for her one day..." pops said. "Sorry for keepin' the truth from you all this time..."

"I'm so sorry, Marcella..."

He couldn't make his parents cry. Not like this. His face burned from the fever, and when he pressed his hand against his face, his mother—his aunt—changed the damp towel on his forehead. Marcella quietly thanked her. "I should be the one saying sorry. I don't want to give you two any more trouble than I have already. I'll move out as soon as I can, and I'll pay you back—"

But before Marcella could finish, his uncle, then his aunt snapped at him. "How did I raise such an idiot son?! I ain't lettin' you move out unless you've found yourself a wife first!"

"Marcella, stop being so silly! You *are* our child! You will *always* be our child, even when you get married!"

"Hey, I'm not an idiot..." *And cut it out with the whole marriage thing.* He wanted to die just remembering the embarrassing thoughts that had gone through his head when death towered over him. Worse, he might just start crying here.

"Nothin's gonna change, Marcella. I'm your pops. She's your ma."

"That's right, Marcella." Their smiles were so bright and genuine, as though they saw through all of his worries.

Never again did Marcella question the relationship they had or whether they were truly his parents. They were never well-off, but they never had to worry about going hungry. When he was mischievous, they chided him. When he studied hard or helped around the house, they praised him. When he got sick, his mom would be by his side the whole time. When he hurt himself really bad, his dad would run with him on his back, all the way to the temple. Marcella was treated no differently than his brothers.

That's right. They're my parents. They are my father and mother.

Marcella struggled to sit up, but he managed, and he screamed, “That’s right. My ma and pops are my ma and pops!” The two of them embraced him with all their might.

He decided that from that day on, he would never bring up his birth mother and father again.

The following day, Marcella and his father went to another room for magic testing. The priest came back with eyes bulging and the number fourteen. Marcella, though, smiled and refused his offer to write up a certification.

The day after, Marcella visited Giusi and told him “I was mistaken about everything!” The older man took him out for drinks. Never had Marcella been treated to drinks that were so hard to swallow.



When the carriage arrived at its destination, Marcella straightened his collar and double-checked to make sure he was presentable. He had visited many a nobleman’s home to make deliveries, but the idea that he’d be walking down their halls as a knight was one he had never imagined before. Having forgotten even how to walk, he was led through the mansion by one of the household’s servants.

The veteran knight who had been training him had announced to him this morning that he would finally meet his master. *You could’ve at least warned me a day in advance!* Marcella had thought, as he’d rushed to get ready in the afternoon. All the training had culminated in this moment. He stood up tall and straight and walked without letting his body sway down the halls of the Scalfarotto main estate.

The exterior walls were white and the roofing was navy blue. The windows were trimmed in silver. The lawn was green, lush and perfectly even throughout, as if someone had mistakenly laid down carpet. Not a speck of dirt or dust was to be found on the blue carpeting, and a single masterpiece of a painting stretched down each hall from end to end. A commoner like Marcella hadn’t a discerning eye for this kind of stuff, but he could tell that certainly no expense had been spared. The winding corridors brought him to a set of doors

at the back of the mansion, which swung open from the inside as soon as he approached them.

There in the spacious parlor sat the man who had invited Marcella here today. “Welcome, Marcella,” he said, employing no titles or honorifics, as if they were very familiar. The smiling man had silver hair and blue eyes—he was supposedly Volf’s older brother, but Marcella couldn’t see any resemblance.

Soon after entering the room, Marcella bowed, his head practically touching the ground. “It is an honor to meet you, Lord Scalfarotto. I am utmost grateful to have received your grace,” he said from the bottom of his heart. It was this man before Marcella who had ordered the priests to give Irma a course of full recovery magic, all without ever having brought up the cost or compensation. Not even his own brother Volf knew; he would not make it known.

“I’m so glad to hear that your wife and children are safe and sound. Please, have a seat,” he said, gesturing. “Oh, and call me Guido; Volf and I are both ‘Scalfarotto,’ after all.”

“With permission then, Lord Guido, thank you very much. I have brought something very trifling, but I hope it will suit your tastes.” Before Marcella sat down on the sofa, he placed the bottle of cloudy estervino—the nicest large-format bottle he could afford—on the table along with a tin of dried kraken and squid. He had terrible doubts whether something so humble would be appropriate, but apparently it was a favorite food of both Volf and his brother.

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you very much. Here, I have something for you too, to celebrate your new start at the Rossetti Trading Company; I am Madam Rossetti’s guardian, after all.” His attendant approached with a silvery magically sealed box, which Guido then set down in front of Marcella. On the front of the case was the coat of arms of the Scalfarotto family. “I’ll get Volf to give you a sword, but I think this might suit you a little better. Do you think you could try it on to make sure it fits?”

“Thank you very much. I shall open it, then.” Timidly and carefully, Marcella opened the silver lid to reveal a pair of chunky gloves made of thick, black leather that had a good shine. Silver-colored rivets decorated the knuckles, while the back of the hand felt as though it had thin metal padding between the

two layers of hide—these sap gloves were more close combat weapons than clothing. He slid his fingers in and pulled the cuffs up to his wrists; it felt as though they had already been broken in—as though he had worn them for years.

“How do they feel?”

“They fit perfectly; I have no doubts they will be very easy to use.” When he squeezed his hands into fists, magic flowed through his body.

“Fantastic. Those black wyvern gloves have black steel embedded in them—they’re more or less a magical tool at this point—and you should be able to punch clean through a strengthened wall, though it may take you some time to master them, of course.”

Black wyvern leather was a very premium material, and the price and power of this set of magical tools would surely get Dahlia’s interest. Marcella couldn’t help but ask, “May I truly accept such a gift?”

“By all means. Use them to protect Volf, Madam Dahlia, your family, or whomever else. And even if you ‘go too far,’ I’ll have people to handle things.”

His last sentence stuck in Marcella’s mind like a thorn, but he dared not inquire any further. “Thank you very much, Lord Guido,” he replied simply. The day after he’d become a knight of the Scalfarotto family and employee of the Rossetti Trading Company, Marcella had had an important conversation with Ivano that included the topic of Guido’s skills and how fearsome they were. But Guido had found a way to magnanimously save Marcella’s wife and children, and Marcella had kept an open mind before coming here today.

Guido cleared his throat. “There is one more thing I wanted to talk to you about—it may rub you the wrong way, however.”

“Is...” Marcella hesitated. “Is it necessary?”

Before Guido responded, he placed a folded piece of parchment with a red wax seal on top of the table. “I looked into your birth father. To nobody’s surprise, he was indeed a nobleman. Shall I give you his name? With how much magical power you possess, your rightful clan may welcome you, perhaps even grant you a rank. I could make introductions on your behalf if you so wish.”

“No, thank you,” Marcella refused instantly, flatly; he did not want any sort of nobility.

“May I tell you a story of the past? Do you know of the hydra attack from about twenty-odd years ago?”

“Yes, I’m familiar.” One would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the capital who didn’t know of the hydra that had shown up at the border. It had taken many lives; it had attacked travelers and merchants on the highway and destroyed villages. Thus, many knights and mages had been dispatched alongside the Order of Beast Hunters to deal with this problem. The hydra’s immense size and magical power had made it a slaughter. Its toxins had even dissolved bodies, leaving the families of the dead warriors with no remains to bury. The entrance to the noble side of the cemetery had never since been without fresh flowers; even when Marcella’s family visited their family’s graves, they would offer some too.

“In that battle, the Kingdom of Ordine lost fourteen members of the Order of Beast Hunters and Mages’ Corps. Among those fourteen was a man who had kite-brown eyes. And though he was born a high-ranking noble, he had fallen deeply in love with a woman who worked in the red-light district. He had even promised he would marry her after the hydra hunt, never mind if his family disowned him. He was a gallant warrior who took off the hydra’s seventh head.” There was no question as to who that knight was.

Marcella engraved the story of the man he had never known into his mind, then asked, “May I ask for the name of the knight? I need not his family name.”

“His name was Sir Bernardi.”

“Bernardi...” he muttered to himself. It was the first time he had heard the name, yet it felt so deeply dear to him.

“The warhammer he wielded during the hydra hunt was kept by the castle for toxicological research and, though the lapse of time has taken its toll, we were able to reforge the metal that hadn’t corroded into the pieces in your gloves.”

“Thank you very much...” For whatever reason, the gloves felt slightly heavier all of a sudden. The warm magic buzzed in Marcella’s fists, as if it were responding to him.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to introduce you to the family?”

“I’m absolutely certain. My wife and children are the most important things in my life.”

“In that case, shall I instead do whatever I can to ensure you and your mother cannot be traced?”

“I would very much appreciate that.”

“Very well.” Guido tossed the parchment into the fireplace, then glanced over to his attendant standing behind him and slightly off to the side; the man threw a bright red flame from his right hand. Burning parchment had an unmistakable stench; Marcella watched until it stopped glowing.

Marcella had to sate his curiosity. “May I ask why you would go so far for my sake?” Just because he had a bit more magic than the average person didn’t mean he had any useful connections to his blood father. He wasn’t anywhere near wealthy either. Rather, having been hired and put through chivalric training, he would be earning no small amount from the Scalfarotto family. He could not understand why Guido would do so much for him, even considering the nobleman was brother to Marcella’s good friend Volf.

“To lock you in? Not to say I won’t put you through a lot when you’re paid our copper—if anything, you’re probably worth more than I’m paying you, considering your magic.”

“There, um, might be a better way to phrase that...”

“Oh, right. I’ll keep that in mind for next time,” he said. His casual demeanor had sucked Marcella into being borderline rude, but Guido had a merry smile on his face. “I’m a coward, Marcella. That’s why I’m asking you to do this instead—please protect Volf and Madam Rossetti.”

“Volf’s—er, Sir Volf is much stronger than me. I know that for a fact.”

“Hm, I wonder. He is stronger now, now that he has people and things he wants to protect.” Guido must’ve been speaking about Dahlia, and Marcella must’ve been obvious about wondering about that—Guido stared with his deep blue eyes and asked, “What Volf wants to protect may soon be too large for his own hands to do so. When Madam Rossetti earns titles and wealth, I fear

trouble may be bound for them. That's why I need someone who I can trust, someone who I know has the power to shield the two of them from danger and, if the time really comes, would not be afraid to dye the world crimson for their sake."

"All part of the job description, Sir Guido; I have prepared myself for that. And I will never forget the grace you have shown me and my family," Marcella answered with full gravity. Guido had saved not only his wife's life but also the lives of the children that Marcella had almost given up on. If he were asked to protect Dahlia and Volf, he would do so with his very life.

"I am very happy to hear that. And if anything should happen to you, know that I will take care of your wife, children, and parents. I shall make sure they will never be in want. And if, gods forbid, you and your family should come to harm, I shall make sure to pay it back in double. I offer this pledge as Guido Scalfarotto—perhaps you would like me to sign it at the temple?"

"No, that would be unnecessary."

"Then we shall have Jonas of Viscounty Goodwin as witness. Jonas? Don't forget what I have said."

"Very well." The attendant's oxide-red eyes were fixed on Marcella; his expression was unmoving, yet it seemed to contain an ever-so-slight smile.

"Marcella, will you wield your fists against all that should do Volf and Madam Rossetti harm?"

With a hard slam, Marcella put his fists together at chest level. His answer had long been decided. "With all my might."



Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—the Raincoat

“Aaaaand done! Look, father! This is my ‘raincoat!’” Carlo’s daughter Dahlia rushed up to him with a pale blue, incredibly thin, and lightweight coat in hand. She had enlisted Lucia’s help to put the garment together, while Dahlia had sewn the very top button—one that read “CR” in red letters on the ivory background—which Carlo was just fastening at the moment.

“Hey, this is *really* light!” The moment he threaded his arms through the sleeves and hung the coat over his shoulders, Carlo was flabbergasted. It was even thinner, lighter, and softer than he had expected—a world of difference compared to the waxed canvas jackets. “I think you’ve absolutely nailed it! Good job, Dahlia!”

“Hee hee! I told you I could do it, didn’t I?” She deserved to be proud. However, the day he’d long dreaded had finally come: today, she refused her father’s pat on the head. “Ack, don’t ruffle my hair! I just tied it up before we went out!” Dahlia had already become a big girl, not to mention that if he ruffled her hair, her friend Lucia would get mad at him.

“All right, let’s go celebrate tonight, you and I!”

“And it’s raining outside too—lucky us!”

Father and daughter braved the terrible rainstorm and went to a neighborhood restaurant for dinner; it was nearly empty because of the weather. They ordered whatever the chef recommended—which happened to be an extra-large serving of beef stew to share—as well as pickles for himself and a fruit salad for Dahlia. Carlo dunked a slice of rye into the piping hot stew and, with a mug of unchilled ale, toasted his proper magical toolmaker of a daughter. Never had an average meal tasted so fine.

Raincoat—that was the name Dahlia had given the lightweight rain-repellent

coat. She had laid down a lot of foundation to get to here today, like the waterproof cloth she had invented, which was the material for this coat. The day she had said that she wanted to make a water-repellent cloth, Carlo hadn't really understood her; he thought her idea would only be redundant, as waxed canvas was already a thing.

"You always say your waxed canvas coat is too heavy, and you never wear it when it rains," she had said. And she was right. Sure, if it were pissing rain outside, there wasn't much of a choice. But under the summer sun? Not a chance with how stuffy it was. Plus, those forty-odd-year-old shoulders of his weren't made to carry so much weight anymore. "This is a rainco—a rain-repellent coat! It's thin, light, and really resistant against water!"

"You always were a dreamer..." But even as he jokingly brushed her off, he knew that if anyone were capable of making something like that, it would be his daughter.

The day after, Dahlia stayed up all night and plowed through a stack of books on magical toolmaking, chemistry, and textiles as well as bestiaries; Carlo reminded her to put her health first. The following week, she ordered all shades of slimes, then hung them out on the tower's roof, letting them dry out in the sun. The ghastly display terrified her playmate Irma, and even the big, burly couriers hesitated to approach their front door. Carlo worried if they weren't causing too much trouble, but a neighbor assuaged his fears: "That's just how the Rossettis are."

Carlo and his own father were like that too when they processed their own materials. He remembered that this one time when his father had been whittling down kelpie bones, the neighbor's dog had found itself a nice treat. He had given chase, but when he saw how happy it was nibbling and gnawing, he had surrendered the bone to the dog. That night, he had gone to its owner—who was shocked to see what the family dog had—with a nice bottle of liquor, and they had ended up sharing a drink.

Carlo himself had hung out cragsnake skin in his yard to dry, which retained its shape and caused at least a few of the neighborhood kids to bawl at the sight. He had felt terrible for the accidental horror, but he made up for it by crawling inside the translucent shedding and putting on a show for them. It had

become something of a local attraction for a while; the people around the neighborhood—and adults who he had never seen before—would drop by to marvel at and experience the shed cragsnake skin for themselves. The city guards had gotten wind of the commotion, but even they had taken part in the revelry before departing without making a fuss.

With such an established relationship and precedent, the old ladies around the block could but laugh at Dahlia's experiments. "The slimes are so much cuter than kelpies and cragsnakes—thank goodness you have a girl in the family!" they joked. Everyone excused the Rossettis' antics, but Carlo still couldn't help but worry for Dahlia's reputation.

Through her thorough research of slimes and slime-based materials, Dahlia learned that blue slimes were perfect for creating her waterproof cloth, so they then placed a large order through the Adventurers' Guild. The first shipment was rotten to the point of stink, but the following shipments were fresh—so fresh that they were still merrily bouncing around—requiring father and daughter to put them down. Carlo was sorry for Tobias, who would sometimes have a blank stare as he helped out with the slime-drying process.

After their dinner, Dahlia seemed more than satisfied with her new creation and, for once, went to bed early. Carlo was too full to do so but had nothing better to keep him occupied in his workshop. He looked at the raincoat; the top button's red letters held his attention, reminding him of a woman he once knew. Just like Dahlia, her mother had gleaming hair the color of strawberry candle flowers. And though the dream of their future together had popped like a soap bubble, he continued to hone his skills for his daughter's sake. He was able to live and live for so long because he had his daughter. And that was joy enough for him. He took the fairy glass lantern out of the cabinet and flicked the switch on, projecting an image of endless skies and a ceaseless field of flowers—the dahlia garden where he and Teresa had gone one late summer. Carlo could see his wife, her laugh, and her flowing red hair, despite the fact that the image hadn't been enchanted into the lantern.

"Teresa..." he whispered quietly, "you know, Dahlia has become your spitting image."



“Mail for you, Baron Rossetti, and your signature, please.”

Carlo stopped fiddling with the voice caster and headed to the gate. The autumn sun beamed from behind the messenger in dark gray and the black coach drawn by a pair of horses. The item was a pure white envelope trimmed with gold foil. The sender’s name was beautifully signed in a reddish-black ink that sparkled with gold dust—an ink used exclusively by a certain department in the royal castle. Carlo signed for the delivery and the coach wasted no time in its departure. Even as he watched it go, his back dripped with a cold sweat.

It was good timing, however; Dahlia and Tobias had gone to the Merchants’ Guild to make a delivery. Carlo went back inside, not to the workshop but to his personal room on the fourth floor, and opened the seal on the letter; the sender was the man who had invited Carlo to be a royal magical toolmaker three times and had subsequently been rejected three times.

A while ago, Carlo had repaired the royal family’s hot water dispenser. He didn’t have quite enough magic, but he’d needed the money, and so he had accepted the job. This time around, however, the offer was to build an improved version for the royals. The very polite words sent him into a fit of rage, making him scrunch up the letter. “If you are unavailable for this task, Baron Rossetti, we ask you to refer to us other magical toolmakers. We hope to have a lasting working relationship, and those less experienced will be considered as well,” it read. Who else but Dahlia and Tobias could the man be referring to? He demanded a Magical Toolmaker Rossetti, one way or another.

For a moment, the image of Carlo’s silver-eyed schoolmate flashed through his head, but he shook that thought away immediately. Oswald would undoubtedly agree to lend his help on the spot, but Carlo could not endanger his friend and his family by asking for help or even for advice. The next person who came to mind was another schoolmate. He, too, would never hesitate to lend a hand. Ireneo was now the guildmaster of the Merchants’, and his wife Gabriella was lowborn, so Carlo did not want to get their families wrapped up in his trouble. Others came to his mind and left just as quickly, leaving but one single option left—himself.

Days later, Carlo boarded the coach that had come to pick him up. Upon his arrival at the castle, he entered without his belongings even being examined.

“Would you please repair the large hot water dispenser in the bath of the royal residence?” asked the man in a black three-piece suit with leather shoes polished all too perfectly. Carlo was flummoxed at the specification document and blueprint atop the ebony desk. A bath did not need water at a constant rolling boil, steam hotter than any sudatorium, or the capability of blasting an area with either of them. But beside him was a hallway encased with sealsilver—the only path that led to the royal residence. There was no way for anyone to pass through without some kind of magic. It was not even a defensive measure—it was a weapon. The man continued, “And would you be able to produce it as a smaller-scale model?”

“No—at least, *I* can’t, I’m afraid, but...perhaps I could make it hotter?” Miniaturizing the hot water dispenser—the steam cannon—was likely not an impossibility. But that man would not use it to defend his king; no, he would wield it against others in the battlefield. While magical tools could be used as weapons, they were not weapons by design—or so Carlo wished, anyway.

“Baron Rossetti, if you were to put your mind to it, I am sure your ‘high-output dryer’ could defeat the most fearsome monsters in one blow. Think of how many of your countrymen you would save, how much you would benefit the kingdom.” His eyes, as dark and cold as the night sky, stared straight at Carlo.

“I haven’t the power. My mind is too narrow and my magic too weak; I doubt I am capable of creating so effective a weapon.”

“Humble as ever, I see. Whatever riches, power, or materials you wish to have at your disposal, let me know. I will do whatever I can to furnish them.”

“I hope you aren’t misunderstanding me—there is nothing wrong with magical tools as weapons, and we are of the same mind: any contribution to the kingdom’s defense is a great one. The crux of the problem is that I am powerless. That is all, no more, no less,” Carlo said. But his answer must’ve rubbed his audience the wrong way—the pupils staring his way dilated.

The man cleared his throat. “How about promoting your barony to a

viscounty? And depending on your results, perhaps an earldom for your descendants? ‘Countess Dahlia Rossetti’ has a great ring to it, wouldn’t you agree? That would secure peace of all forms for her.” That smile he had on—it was the first time he’d smiled from his heart, and it resembled the smug satisfaction of a sore winner.

That utter fucking bastard—the man knew where to hit Carlo, whose blood boiled. “Your generous offer is utmost enticing. However, we are but humble magical toolmakers, not gallant knights nor wealthy merchants. It is as a magical toolmaker that I have accepted today’s assignment to fix the royal family’s large hot water dispenser, and I cannot guarantee any results without first attempting the work.”

The man’s smile disappeared. He rolled his fingers on the ebony desk once, then a second time. “Baron Rossetti, what is the remuneration you desire? I shall try to meet your expectations.”

“I ask for two things. The first: never, ever ask my apprentices to craft magical tools for the castle. The second: reinstate the financial assistance from the kingdom to Earldom Lamberti.”

“Very well. I accept,” the man said. “I see we do not have a trusting relationship, so shall we go to the temple and—”

“No, that is quite all right. Instead, I ask that I be allowed to have a scrivener prepare us the appropriate documents. Of course, I do not intend to have a government official for the service, so I ask that you keep the signed document.”

The man narrowed his eyes in suspicion—a natural reaction to such a flawed idea, one that the man could easily cover up if he so wished. Well, it would just be as easy for him to cover up Carlo in a wooden box and some loose soil too. But this promise would be one bound by honor and the man’s noble name—something Carlo thought the man would cherish. “Understood. I accept your conditions. However, I have two questions of my own: what if your apprentices wish to join us?”

“I ask that you respect their wishes.”

“As for the matter regarding the Lamberti family—your former wife’s family—

shall I mention your role?”

“No, please don’t.”

“You truly are an enigma...” a mutter escaped from the man’s thin lips as he pressed his fingers against his mouth in shock. He assumed a smile when he returned his gaze to Carlo. “Baron Carlo Rossetti, I swear on my name that I shall never reach out to you again. But if you ever change your mind about working with the castle—nay, becoming a magical toolmaker by my side—please contact me whenever you wish.”

That was the fourth and last time the man would ever attempt to have Carlo.

Afterwards, Carlo and the man, escorted by a knight, passed through the sealsilver-clad hall and into a small room by the side. There were a dozen or so knights guarding the hall, but Carlo would not meet a single person on the royal residence side.

“There is someone inside attempting the task—likely in vain,” the man said with a biting cold in his tone as he opened the door.

A blinding light was shining from the room, causing Carlo to instinctively shut his eyes. Someone must be in the middle of enchanting. That torrent of magic—perhaps a mage? The flow was so powerful yet so rough, and the material was howling back with a blast of wind. It was only when the enchanter was on the verge of collapse that Carlo saw what was on the table—a sköll fang. He rushed inside and ripped the enchanter away from the danger, holding him upright until he found strength in his legs. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, thank you...” he said, his voice trailing off as he slowly completed his sentence. He was still young—at least younger than Carlo—with inky black hair, indigo-gray eyes, and a body that was as cold as a corpse. The silvery round object sparkled on the table. “It looks like I managed to somehow crystallize it. Thank goodness I didn’t waste the sköll fang.” He spoke as though it were a casual affair when it was anything but.

The man tossed the youth a mana potion and said, “Will you be able to complete the enchantment?”

“I’m afraid not. I have failed twice already. Forgive me...” As desperate as the youth was to get on his feet and answer the question, he could hardly stand even with Carlo supporting him and feeding him a mana potion.

The man only narrowed his eyes. “This is the magical circuit. It should theoretically work, but two of our own magical toolmakers have already failed, and that is despite their large magic capacity.” On the wall was the massive scribble of lines that constituted the circuitry. It was even worse than on the specification document and blueprint. And worse because—

“Enchanting with sköll fang will demand a great surge of mana, else the traces may be broken. This will need speed and capacity all at once...” The sköll fang was a mischievous and selfish material. It took however much magic it wanted, and that was whether the toolmaker had enough or not. That was true not only when crystallizing it like the youth had but also when using it to draw traces and when applying fixing spells to it. Carlo would have to chug magic potions as he worked on the circuitry, but the problem was how many bottles would be needed—Carlo did not have much leeway left, having already raised his magic to the limit.

“As you are privy to such confidential information already, it would be a problem if you were to refuse now. Perhaps I could bring you someone with whom you are comfortable working?” Such was the man prone to doing, weaving spider silk around all those near Carlo until he had everyone in his web.

There was something Carlo could do, however, and that was to simply not ask for any help. “Would it be possible to get a dozen bottles of mana potions?”

“Certainly, but will you be able to handle it by yourself?”

“I believe we have a deal already, don’t we, —” Carlo said, ending his sentence by addressing the man with his rank and name.

It was the first time the man had ever shown any sort of confusion. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but he only stared with his black eyes.

Carlo said as little as the man did and smiled back at him. The man had undoubtedly arrived with much planned and schemed in his head, but it was now obvious he didn’t fully understand Carlo.

“Very well. I shall bring them to you at once,” the man said. “Also, would you be so kind as to educate the boy? He has quite the reservoir of mana but lacks any offensive or healing magic—he’s fit only to become a magical toolmaker.”

The mage with the indigo-gray eyes was young for sure. He must be one of the man’s toolmakers. His gaze was cast downwards, his teeth biting down hard on his lip.

And “fit only to become a magical toolmaker”? There was absolutely nothing lesser about their profession. To hurl such venom-riddled words in front of Carlo was unbelievable. There was no understanding the man.

“I would not be able to teach anyone who isn’t my apprentice already, but as a fellow toolmaker, he is more than welcome to stay and watch.”

“Is it true, Baron Rossetti, that magical toolmakers are not fond of working in front of an audience?”

“Yes, as it is quite difficult to concentrate with any people other than fellow toolmakers in the room,” Carlo replied with a smile, having essentially told the man to make like a tree.

“Understood. I shall leave you to your task.” It was almost anticlimactic how readily he agreed to it, and he left with the guard.

That left Carlo with the youth, who immediately bowed so deep that his inky black hair nearly swept the ground. “My apologies, good sir! My incompetence has already caused you so much trouble...”

“Fret not, please. I, too, failed again and again when I was your age. In fact, I think I had more failures than successes! Erm, what was your name again?”

“My name is Carmine Zanardi, but please call me Carmine, Baron Rossetti.”

Carlo and Carmine then went on to chat for some time. The youth was genuinely and extremely impressed by Dahlia’s waterproof cloth; it almost seemed like a trap. Carmine explained that he had been trying to make something similar and had gone through the same process of trial and error that Dahlia had. He said he’d love to talk more with her about inventions, and Carlo couldn’t help but agree in his head that it might be a good idea.

Carlo went on to ask Carmine why he would agree to work on the large dispenser. Apparently, it wasn't much of a choice—he had been ordered to take on the task because of his large reserves of magic. Carmine hadn't ever worked with sköll fang before, and his clumsy control had caused him to fail over and over again, but he'd been told he only had to do this one thing before they let him back to his regular duties. It was likely that Carmine, like Carlo, wasn't interested in or suited to developing magical weaponry.

Carmine lamented that he had a lot of magic but it didn't flow straight or true, so Carlo found a metallic plate lying around the room and brought it to him, then taught him how to manipulate his magic as though he were wrapping the plate in a sheet of cloth. The youth was a quick learner, and by the time the mana potions had arrived, Carmine was able to apply his magic to the plate in an even layer.

The two of them then examined the magical circuit that had been sketched on the white wall with dark gray ink. For the enchantment, Carlo used both the sköll fang that Carmine had crystallized earlier and a fire dragon scale that had been prepared for him. “Mr. Carmine, under no circumstances are you to interrupt me during the process.”

Carlo took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. It had been a while since he had worn his marriage bracelet studded with red gems, and he chose not to take it off before enchanting. He downed the bottles of mana potion and placed the empties on the table beside him. Carmine looked as though he already wanted to speak up, but Carlo stopped him with just the look in his eyes, and the former squeezed his fist shut.

With his right hand raised, Carlo began releasing a slow, steady stream of magic. His muted rainbow combined with the silver and crimson light to etch the circuit from left to right, tearing away every last bit of energy he had. He tried his best to maintain his concentration in order to make it smooth and even; even the slightest break meant blurred lines. No doubt Dahlia would get angry at him if she saw him construct the enchantment before the circuitry. Every bottle of mana potion he drank was a risk to his health, and if Carlo's own father had found out, he would have spanked him sore. Still, that was what being a parent was about—to protect one's children. And he understood not all

parents were like him; Carlo so loved his daughter, he would blissfully be rent to nought but sand and dust if it meant being Dahlia's shield.

"Hngk...!" Carlo's heart raced quicker and his breaths became shallower, and whenever he felt like his breakfast was going to come up, he would knock back another bottle. His magic was draining even quicker than he had anticipated—two, three, now four bottles tossed by his feet. He appreciated that Carmine would pop open the tops and have the mana potions at the ready for him.

At the seventh bottle, his body croaked as his magic went up one grade. The rainbow stream became even more vivid as it blended in the silver and crimson lights. Carlo could but chuckle—the power he had yearned for as a young man was finally here, yet never would he have imagined this was the way he'd achieve it; the rush of it all eased his nausea just slightly.

However, when Carlo was about ninety percent finished with enchanting the circuit on the wall and eight bottles deep, all the light disappeared from his vision for a moment. "Hrgk!" His body could not keep up; the overencumbering magic had begun to eat away at his physical self. His rainbow stream was stained with blood, his brain pounded in his skull, his vision shook and blurred, his breathing weakened as though he were drowning, his chest ached, his hands shook, his nails split, his arms burned in a black and red flame from his overflowing magic, his throat filled with blood—but that was no reason to stop, and Carlo continued straining to maintain the enchantment.

The sköll fang and the fire dragon scale twinkled, mocking his feeble attempt. "Bring it on, you sorry monsters!" He had never worked with stronger materials, but neither had he ever had as much magical power—there would be no bigger challenge he could surmount. *Do not falter, Magical Toolmaker Rossetti—this is the name you have received from father and the name to which your daughter and son will succeed. You have no business losing to the likes of mere monsters.*

Suddenly, Carlo's rainbow stream completely disappeared and turned into a red, then the darkest of blacks. Deep in his chest, it felt not like magic but as if his very life were being sucked out of him—a feeling that he had never known before.

"Fix, you accursed thing!" The wall glowed a fiery red in the scorching blast;

Carlo almost heard the sköll and fire dragon cry out in pain. “That should be it...” But as he went to test out the circuit, the world spun and then pulled him down to the floor.

“Lord Carlo! Hang on!” Carmine shouted as he showered Carlo in a potion—one of undoubtedly very dear price.

As luck would have it, it went up his nose and he choked and coughed. *Please, anywhere but my face.* “I’m fine. But oh, what a waste...” His hands had been in tatters and singed red, but the pain and wounds were disappearing without leaving any scars behind. His fingernails fell to the ground as new ones grew in—though by the way they now looked, a manicure might be in order. Unfortunately, his sleeves had been burned away; that was something only money, not potions, could fix.

Carmine, with his lower lip still bleeding where he’d bit it too hard, thrust out a high potion. Despite the silence, Carlo understood it was for him to drink, and he did so after thanking the youth. He could see why they were three times the price of a regular potion—even the pain deep inside his body disappeared in a flash. Then, the youth snapped. “Why would you push yourself that far?!” It was obvious that he cared and worried; he had seen Carlo spit up blood and nearly incinerate himself, after all.

“There is a magical toolmaker whom I would not care to take my eyes off of, not even for a split second. If I had failed here today, then that man would change targets. And I was not—am not—about to let that happen.” Carlo gathered the words from his heart. “I suppose that’s what they call a father’s pride.”

“A...father’s pride.” Carmine parroted the words back before expressing, almost silently but with terrible pain, how enviable he thought that notion. His look of delight at having received this lesson, his look of aching worry for Carlo, and his look of frustration with himself for having failed at the task—Carmine was just like Dahlia. The youth put a blanket over Carlo, then wiped the bloodstains from his arms and chin. He tried to maintain a neutral expression, but it was obvious that his eyes were red, his hands were trembling, and he was gnashing his teeth.

Seeing all that, Carlo couldn't help but say, "Mr. Carmine, when you have time, sneak away to the Green Tower, but make sure you have a bottle of drink in hand—I'll introduce you to my daughter." He couldn't be sure he'd still be alive when the youth took up the offer, but they would have good stories to share, and perhaps they'd even make for good friends.

Carlo could not fight his dizziness any longer; he closed his eyes as he chatted. But before he knew it, consciousness slipped away from him; it wasn't until the dead of night that Carmine secretly took him home in a carriage.

The following week, Carlo's close friend and chairman of Orlando & Co. invited him to go out for drinks, as they often did. This time, though, the establishment was a little farther away in the South District. The two chums sat across from each other in the private room on the third floor, sharing wine and food a touch nicer than usual. Carlo didn't shy away from being treated to a good dinner, and after he'd gratefully enjoyed the meal, his host even graced the table with a bottle of nearly ancient red wine—that was when it hit him.

"What's wrong, Teo?"

"Carlo, I, erm, I haven't told anyone else yet, but..."

"I knew it—you've fallen head over heels for me."

But his friend did not show his usual good humor. "No, not quite love, but a confession nonetheless."

"Go on, then, spit it out."

Teo paused. "There's about a year left in my hourglass."

Carlo's glass fell from his hand; a sip, maybe two, stained the linen scarlet. "Hey, that's no joking matter..." But he knew from the color of his friend's eyes that there was no punch line coming.

"I'll be telling my wife soon; her health isn't perfect either. Ireneo, I have no worries about. I wish I could have taught him more about how to handle the family business, but I'm sure he'll get the hang of it sooner than later. That boy is a natural, and I know he'll do well wherever he ends up," he said. "I am, however, worried about Tobias. That's why, when I learned about my illness, I

asked that he and Dahlia get married.”

Teo had in fact asked quite a few times. They were around the same age and both of them were healthy. Neither their work nor their relatives should pose any problem. All in all, it wasn’t a bad idea. But Carlo couldn’t see them as a couple so much as siblings, and so he never did take Teo up on his offer.

“I understand that even though we’re the best of friends, it’s a big, selfish request from me. I know how rude I am being to you, a magical toolmaker and a baron at that. I also know that you worry about Dahlia attracting too much attention, so use Orlando & Co. as an umbrella. Ireneo knows already too. If any nobles try to get their hands on Dahlia, I can get my own nobles to put an end to that. I have the cash to do so as well,” Teo said like the businessman that he was. But money alone could not stop the man.

“Everything will be okay, Carlo.” He flashed the bratty smile that he’d had since they were little—well, more the grin of a robber baron now, since they were hardly children anymore. “If things do get really dicey, I’ll have my son take you and Dahlia on a long vacation abroad until things cool down.” Teo had a lot of reach; there was no doubt that he could secretly smuggle people in and out of the kingdom, though that would be a huge risk Carlo didn’t want them to take.

“Teo, when did you learn about that?”

“The day before yesterday. I heard through the grapevine.”

“Well, I’ve already dealt with all of that as of last week. I completed what they asked for, and in return, we had a promise that the man would never put his hands on my apprentices. We even got a scrivener and all that,” he explained. “Oh, by the by, I’m on the same boat as you. What a coinkydink.”

“Carlo!”

Carlo wished Teo would allow him to turn their looming deaths into a laughing matter. Carlo wished he didn’t have to hear Teo cry his name out in such pain and sadness. Carlo wished Teo would loosen his grip on his left hand. He tried to smile as naturally as possible. “You said you worried about Tobias, but you needn’t do so. I have no doubts he will become a great toolmaker. And, yes, I’ll accept your request.”

“Thank you...”

“That’s my line,” Carlo said. He filled their glasses halfway up and the two clinked them again.

But Teo didn’t seem any more cheerful. “You know, aside from my family, there’s no one I’m more glad to have met.”

“My magical tools do make you a lot of money,” Carlo quipped. “But likewise, meeting you was the best thing that—wait, hold on. This really does sound like we’re just flirting with each other, doesn’t it?”

“Cut it out, Carlo—I wouldn’t want my wife to run away.”

“Hah! Bold words coming from the man who stole Oz’s woman!” he harrumphed.

“Blasphemy. They were merely work friends; I stole nothing from that man.”

“Even when he’s not around, you still don’t refer to Oz by his name, not even ‘Oswald’ or ‘Chairman Zola.’”

Teo’s response was to stare Carlo in the eye and dump wine into his glass. When it almost overflowed, Carlo rushed to slurp the wine from the top, making both of them cackle in the process.

The sands of time slipped away quicker by the second, yet the two men managed to make merry about nothing—something that had never really changed between them. Carlo would have loved it if they could have poured drinks for each other on the other side as well; whether he would be able to was still a mystery.

It turned out his good friend didn’t even have a year left. By the turn of the season, Carlo had to watch his friend depart all too quickly.

During dinner at the tower, Carlo hacked up a lung. He pressed his hand at his mouth and managed to squeak out, “Yeowch! Hot!”

“Of course it is! The chicken just came out of the oil! I’ll get you water!”

As Dahlia rushed to the kitchen, Carlo grabbed his handkerchief and wiped the red from his mouth as best as he could, then chugged the potion he had

hidden in his jacket pocket. The pain subsided in a flash, but the effects would last only three days and gradually weaken over that period. He had found out for himself that excess magic had destroyed his body and that no potion could cure him. Carlo could see just how little sand was left in the top bulb. He hid the truth from his apprentices by only instructing them when he could withstand enchanting. And when he was frail, he retired to sleep in his study under the pretext of needing to do research.

He caught on to how Dahlia's hair had been dyed to a darker, more subdued shade. "I look more mature this way, don't I?" she would say to be brave, but Carlo knew that was to keep her from standing out too much. He wished to tell her that her natural strawberry candle hair looked best. He wanted to ask whether it was Tobias who had convinced her to change the color or whether she'd decided it all on her own. But Carlo knew this was already none of his business and thought better of saying anything.

How many more times would he be able to sit around the dinner table with his daughter? Steam continued to billow from the plate of fried chicken, which was now half empty. This was one of the best things that his beloved daughter made, yet it was regrettable that Carlo could barely taste anymore. Perhaps it was better to stuff himself with whatever he could—heartburn be damned—lest he regret not doing so while he still had the health to keep food down. That was despite still remembering the days when he'd needed medicine to soothe his stomach after eating too much. Perhaps he was too greedy.

"Here, water!" Dahlia returned with a filled glass. "Look at you! You've choked until you've got tears in your eyes..."

"Sorry!" He had tried his best, but he couldn't suppress the tears welling in his eyes. He could only apologize, gulp down the water, and then dab his face with a second handkerchief.

"Now, pace yourself this time, father," she said, beaming.

It didn't feel right to be pleased with his own dishonesty, but what a relief—he could still hide his faltering body; he could still manage to lie to his daughter. Throughout the night, Carlo continued to serenade the fried chicken he could hardly taste.

The next day, Carlo walked to a magical tool shop in the nobles' quarter, a place he rarely visited. "Two spellbooks—er, make that one, please." He figured the two of them could share one, but which one? He had a tough time deciding, but he ended up choosing one bound in reddish-brown leather with an orange garnet in the front cover. The pages were still blank, but surely there was still time to fill in the whole book. What he couldn't write down, he'd have to demonstrate to his apprentices.

With the book in hand, he returned to the tower. There, he used an excuse of needing to move a bookshelf and had Tobias go up to the fourth-floor study. Tobias had been terribly depressed after his father's passing, yet his craftsmanship was as perfect as ever. He was a man who could control his feelings and separate them from his work.

"I'll have the book completed in the days to come, but let's get this bound to you first, Tobias."

"Master, isn't this a little early for me? I'm still very inexperienced..."

"Don't worry about it. And sorry for dropping this on you, but could you protect Dahlia for me?" Carlo's words had Tobias looking awfully confused. "See, all I'm familiar with in this world is magical tools. I haven't been able to teach Dahlia everything about personal relationships or the art of business. I want you to be in front of her and protect her, since you have the business stuff mastered already and you've got a good head on your shoulders."

"That's not true; I still have a long way to go," Tobias said. "Master, I hope you're not feeling fainthearted because the doctor ordered you to moderate your drinking." His smirk was very reminiscent of his father's—not to mention Carlo's.

Quietly, through work, travel, and chores, Tobias protected Dahlia behind the curtain. He undoubtedly loved Dahlia, but Carlo knew it to be the love and protectiveness that an older brother would show his little sister. There was no romance between them. But even so, if they could quietly live together as a family, they would find peace, and nothing would be better for Carlo.

Orlando & Co. hadn't quite regained its footing after Teo's death. Ireneo was

trying his damndest to sail the company through rough seas, but as capable as he was, his skills were still somewhat shy of his late father's; he would not have quite the power to shield Dahlia and Tobias if things took a turn for the worse. Hence, the importance of not standing out. It'd take a few years before Orlando & Co. made a comeback, and until then, Carlo's apprentices had to stay hidden and safe.

So thought Carlo as he watched his eldest apprentice complete the blood bond to the spellbook.



Though the spring sun was bright, Carlo's vision fluttered and his step was uncertain. He let out a big yawn, pretending as though he were still under the thrall of the sandman, as he climbed slowly down to the workshop.

"We're just about to go out to the Merchants' Guild to make a delivery."

"I'll be picking up groceries on the way back!"

Tobias and Dahlia were on their way out, and Carlo responded in a determinedly cheerful tone. "Thanks! And don't forget to pick up a case of red wine too!"

"Father! I know you've been working and drinking too much this whole month!"

"Moderation, master, or else you'll be visiting the doctors again." The two of them chided him in sync and he groaned and brushed them off—all as expected.

"Welp, time to fiddle with this some more," Carlo said, taking a seat in front of the two of them. He took the already completed magical lantern apart, or at least he pretended to until the two of them walked to the door. The pain in his chest was worse than usual, but he couldn't show it; he did not want those two to worry. "Oh, could you keep the door open? Some fresh air in here would be good."

Tobias did as instructed, then Dahlia walked past Carlo. It wasn't as though the room was musty or stuffy—the thought that this might be the last sight of those two had intruded on Carlo. His deteriorating health really put fear in the

man; it wasn't like him to think this way.

Fortunately, those two didn't seem to have noticed Carlo's nervousness, and they were busy grabbing products here and there. "I'll get that. It's slippery out there."

"Thank you."

Carlo was glad that Tobias, though a little curt, was watching out for her. They were engaged, but never had he seen the two of them hold hands. They had never sneaked out together with blushing faces either. Sometimes, they might get excited talking about magical tools or materials, but again, they seemed like no more than siblings. Who could blame them? They were merely following the ruts their parents had carved onto the road; getting together had never been their own will.

Carlo would have been lying if he'd said he didn't worry about Dahlia and Tobias's lack of mutual understanding and the possibility that their future marriage would be loveless. He would've loved to watch over them and watch them grow as people. He would've loved to correct their course if they headed down the wrong path. He would've loved to extend a hand if they fell down and couldn't stand up. There was so much he had yet to teach the two of them as their master, so much he had yet to do for her as her father. And despite the mountain of regrets, he realized there was little he could do for them anymore. *I ought to get that spellbook finished.*

As Carlo saw them off, Tobias and Dahlia turned back to say goodbye.

"We'll be back soon, master."

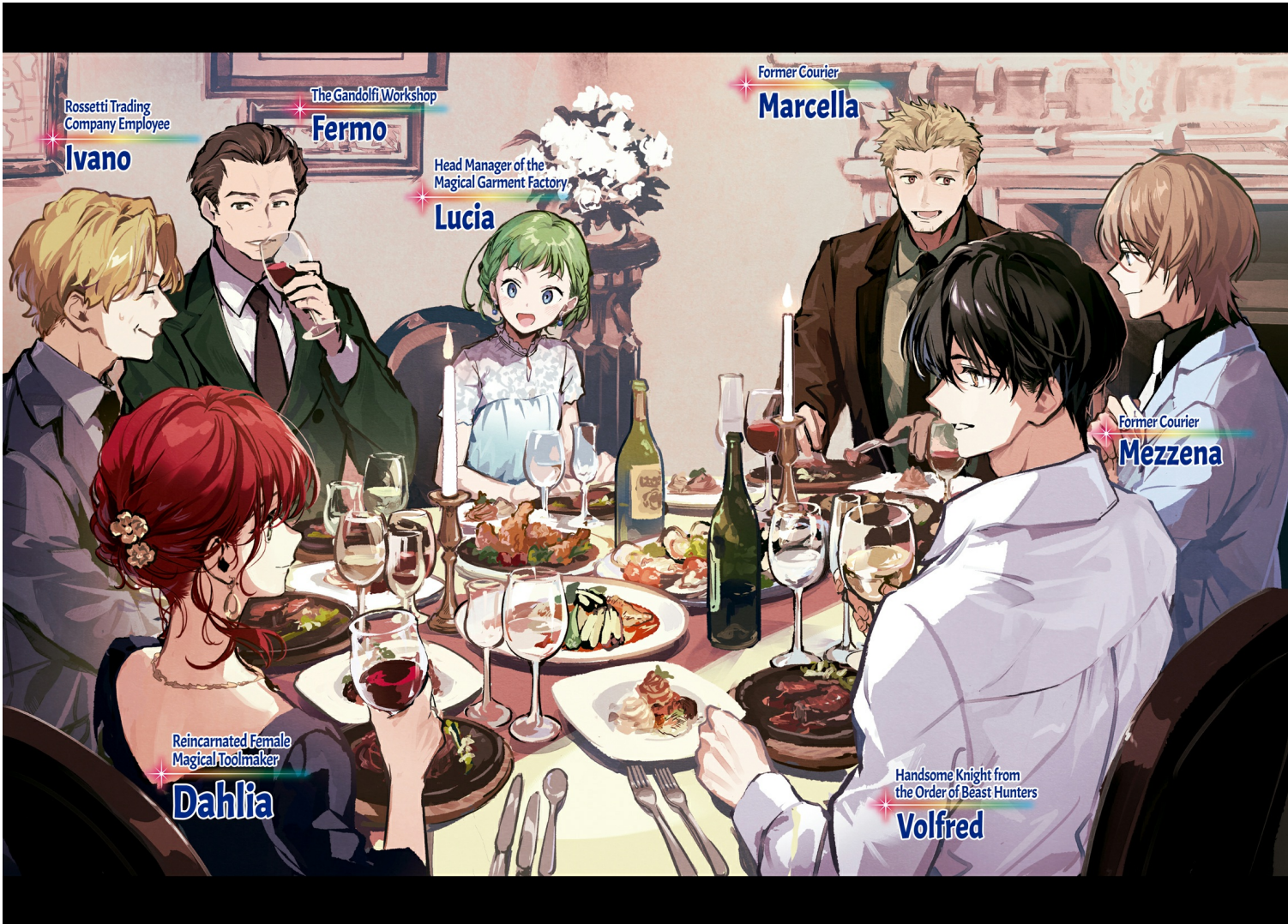
"See you soon, father."

"Take care, you two..." Carlo said aloud. What they didn't hear was: *I hope you help and encourage each other and become great toolmakers. I hope you stay healthy, your lives are trouble-free, and your days are filled with happiness. I hope your future is long and peaceful and spent with those you love and care about; you'll be happy if you can—well, that's just me imposing my wishes on them again. I hope you find happiness your own way. I pray for only that.*

An invigorating spring breeze blew from the other side of the threshold. The

sun's rays were dazzling, hiding their distant figures from Carlo.





Rossetti Trading
Company Employee

Ivano

The Gandolfi Workshop

Fermo

Head Manager of the
Magical Garment Factory

Lucia

Former Courier

Marcella

Former Courier

Mezzena

Reincarnated Female
Magical Toolmaker

Dahlia

Handsome Knight from
the Order of Beast Hunters

Volfred



Former Fiancé and
Senior Apprentice

Tobias

**"I'LL
ADAPT TO
YOU."**

It was enough
to assuage her fears;
ironically, she still had
faith in his magical
toolmaking skills.



Just as
she began to
lose hope—

Bonus Translator's and Editor's Notes

[Osman/TL]

Can you believe we're here together again? Translation can be such hard work when I'm in the thick of things, but it feels like it was just a few days ago that I was writing the bonus content for the previous book!

Both Shakuzan and I agree that Volume 6 was undoubtedly the best volume so far! The tension and excitement of Irma's pregnancy came right away in the opening was absolutely gripping. Then, during the crafting to save their lives, we were treated to the changed dynamics in the relationship between Dahlia and Tobias. Not only were there many great scenes of humor, character development, romance, and cuteness (drunk Lucia *adorable!!!*), I gotta admit I also shed a few tears at Marcella's interlude and the extra story.

I'm hoping we get to meet some new characters in the upcoming volumes too. Not that the established ones have gotten stale or anything, but I think the audience has worked up an appetite for fresh plot and intriguing conflict!

A big thanks to the editor Shakuzan for being such a great partner to work with, always deciphering my sections of word vomit in the translation and comments and picking out errors with a fine-tooth comb. I'd like to thank Ryoko again as well for help with the "financial assistance" line in the extra story. Such a simple few words, but I could *not* wrap my head around it the first few times I stared at them. It really helps to be able to get help from someone who not only is a native speaker but also someone who is very familiar with the series. Oh, and Ryoko also manages the *Dahlia* wiki! Such a great resource.

I really enjoy interacting with everyone on the forum and Discord server, and it's really encouraging to see people love what you worked on! So, as always, thank *you* for the continued support, and I hope to see you again at the end of the next volume!

You've Got Questions, We've Got Answers

Let's start off with an easier question. Lily Garden asks: **"Since *Dahlia* is a story about craftsmanship with detailed descriptions of creating magical tools, has the series inspired you to try crafting for yourself?"**

[Osman/TL]

Like, literally? Hmm. I would like to try crafting magical tools if I could, but I don't know if I'd make it a career even if I were good at it. I'm worried I don't have Dahlia's imagination, but I'd do grunt work like Tobias?

As for crafting IRL, I've built model cars and painted a miniature before and really enjoyed it! I also work on my car from time to time. I'm not very good at wrenching, but I get basic maintenance done by myself.

"What about cooking? Or alcohol consumption?" Tacitus adds to the question above.

[Osman/TL]

I'm always waiting for the series to show me a dish that I really want to recreate, but nothing has really caught my curiosity yet! Maybe when I finally do, I'll put the recipe here to share? o:

At the end of every year, I try to make a big batch of alcohol as presents for my friends. A few years back, I did a fat-washed rum for hot buttered rum which I really enjoyed. This past holiday season, though, I made glögg (a Swedish mulled wine) which I didn't really like... The combination of spices I used had a—for a lack of a better way to put it—old person taste to it. Everyone else seemed to love it, so mission accomplished, I guess!

[Shakuzan/ED]

Dahlia does frequently inspire me to drink, yes, mainly when she finds herself thinking of Volf but can't for the life of her figure out *why*.

Incidentally, Amagishi-san occasionally posts recipes on Twitter (@amagishihisaya), although I have yet to try making any myself!

Continuing on the theme of food, TheGrimLich asks: **“Which monster that we've seen thus far do you, personally, think would be the most delicious? The least delicious?”**

[Osman/TL]

Kraken or green squid would probably be the tastiest! When squid is really fresh, its texture is really creamy and I absolutely love it. Oh, and how about dried shredded squid? With a nice frosty beer on the side? One of the big little joys of life. Don't forget about grilled squid either! The tentacles are so good when they get toasty and smoky. There's just so much you can do with kraken and green squid that would turn out good.

Setting aside inedible monsters like dullahans—literal walking suits of armor—I don't think many monsters would be very tasty. Slimes would probably be goopy, goblins and the like are probably too humanoid to be hunted for food, and strong monsters are probably lean and tough. I think the marsh spider would probably be the ickiest with its hairs and all. Or maybe they would be good when they're freshly molted, kinda like soft-shell crab?

[Shakuzan/ED]

Giant boar seems like a safe bet for most delicious—although, having recently eaten a reptile for the first time in the form of a gator po' boy (it really does taste like chicken!), I'd at least give forest serpent a try. Least delicious has to be the marsh spider, right?

True to their username, **“Who would you pick to voice Dahlia and Volf in a hypothetical anime adaptation?”** asks AnimeJ.

[Shakuzan/ED]

Speaking very generally, I always imagine *Dahlia* having relatively subdued voice acting, with only a few characters who “sound anime” (mainly Lucia).

Fantasy casting Dahlia is particularly tricky. She’s intelligent and outgoing but just a little insecure, and I feel like a lot of *seiyuu* tend to play similar girl genius characters to one of two extremes: shy or brassy—neither of which quite fits Dahlia. As I was thinking back through favorite vocal performances that are a little more offbeat, one possibility that occurred to me was Maeda Ai, who’s primarily a film actress but voiced Kino in the 2003 *Kino’s Journey*. Maeda projects a lot of intelligence and sensitivity, although Kino is rather more poised than Dahlia.

Fans have unfortunately turned him into a one-dimensional meme ever since *Stardust Crusaders*, but it’s tempting to name Miyake Kenta for Volf, who is, after all, cut from the same cloth as the “big protective guy” characters Miyake has been voicing for decades. (Watanabe no Tsuna in *Otogi Zōshi* is an early example who’s somewhat Volf-like in his prowess with the sword and loyalty to a woman he refuses to touch.) On the other hand, given that Volf is an aristocrat, I sometimes picture him as the kind of man who sounds less macho than he looks, besides which it’s hard to imagine Miyake, with his stentorian baritone, capturing the dopey chocolate Lab aspect that Volf takes on around Dahlia. That being the case, casting a more naive-sounding performer against type might pay unexpected dividends.

I also feel compelled to point out that (although I may be imagining it) there are a couple of passages that read to me as though Amagishi-san is describing character acting tics associated with Kyoto Animation—in this volume’s chapter “Good Night and Pleasant Dreams,” Dahlia waves “both hands in front of her, frantically denying the accusation,” which sounds an awful lot like director/key animator Yamada Naoko’s “KyoAni jazz hands”—so the correct answer here, in terms of the author’s intentions, may well be “A couple of voice actors who work with that studio.” Hikasa Yoko’s performance as Mio in *K-On!* is not too far off from how I imagine Dahlia.

[Osman/TL]

I used to watch a lot more anime but I’ve dropped off in recent years, so I’m

kinda out of the loop with regards to voice artists. That being said, I’ve always imagined Dahlia to have a kinda softer, subdued voice—a character that doesn’t “sound anime,” as Shakuzan aptly put it—so I’m thinking Ishikawa Yui playing *Violet Evergarden*. However, [the Dahlia PV](#) had Oonishi Saori as a narrator—and from my view, their choice for Dahlia Rossetti—so it should go to her, and it would work great. For Volf, he should definitely have a soft and somewhat deep voice. I know even less about VAs for male characters, but if I had to cast someone, I think Miyano Mamoru would fit the bill, as clichéd as that might be, haha.

Next, let’s get into some hard-hitting questions. **“What is the most difficult bit of wordplay you’ve had to localize thus far? Were there times you needed to find an English equivalent that preserved the overall spirit of the original?”** asks zwabbit.

[Osman/TL]

A tricky turn of phrase in this volume was in the first chapter where Volf talks about how cooking bacon in the barracks draws uninvited guests. The term he uses is 人寄せベーコン (lit. *crowd-drawing bacon*), and from what I can surmise, it’s probably a play on 人寄せパンダ (lit. *crowd-drawing panda*, meaning “main attraction”, like in a zoo). We couldn’t think of an English equivalent that would fit the bill—I didn’t want to write anything that would imply the existence of zoos or pandas in the world of *Dahlia*, for example—and I ended up translating the dialogue with a more literal approach with regards to its meaning.

The usage of “picture books” in the translation is something I really like. It’s an obvious-enough euphemism that has some semblance with the source material’s usage of 姿絵 (“portrait”). It also gave me room to be creative—I decided to ham it up a little with “pretty portraits of debaucherous dames”, “stacks of skintone softbacks”, and “leggy ladies” to highlight the humor (as I had a riot reading the passage).

[Shakuzan/ED]

I love all of the language around the “picture books.” Dated sexual slang is just inherently funny.

Torka adds: **“What's the best wordplay you've translated, like a phrase or term that just seemed to be perfect for the context?”**

[Osman/TL]

In the chapter “The Rossetti Trading Company’s Meet and Greet,” the source used 六倍返し in reference to Fermo sharing six new inventions with Dahlia for them to sign as codevelopers. Another reading of that phrase could be framed as Fermo enacting a revenge six times as deadly, hence the translation of “avenged sixfold,” which coincidentally riffs off a band called Avenged Sevenfold (which I just learned is a reference to the story of Cain and Abel from the Bible!)

Another (self-admittedly) clever bit was in “Crystal-Roasted Sweet Potatoes and Silversabers.” In the source, Volf described how his mother said the saury were “still thrashing about in his stomach.” I played into the “saber” part of “saberfish,” as that’s what they would probably call them instead of “slumfish” given his upper-crust background, and phrased the translation such they they were “still rattling around inside him.”

PuckGoodfellow00 0 wondered something similar, asking: **“When translating, do you try to keep the Japanese idioms? Or do you use the English language equivalent more often?”**

[Osman/TL]

It would definitely be ideal to use something similarly-phrased and that means the same thing in English whenever possible, but rarely do adages and idioms line up like that in both languages. In that case, I believe the second best option would be to use the closest English equivalent.

Something in this volume that worked really well was in “The New Guarantor and the Kit,” where Ivano said “Only a kit. Still a silver fox.” Though it almost

reads like an adapted idiom, this line was translated rather literally: the English phrase “silver fox”—meaning an attractive older man with a slight implication of wiliness—was perfect in the context, and the “kit” extension was natural.

kingpendragon asks: **“Do you ever think ‘Oh, I know the *perfect* word for that, but almost no one will get what it means’? Or maybe ‘There is a good word for that but *this* character wouldn't know it’?”**

[Osman/TL]

The old-timey-ness of the setting allows me to use a lot of vocabulary that might be dated and there are a lot of places like crafting and biology where I feel like I should use accurate technical terms. I don’t shy away from doing so; I’d rather have the audience flip open a dictionary than to sacrifice flavor. But the second part rings true! Normally, I reserve any real-life references for when the story is in Dahlia’s point of view as she is the only character (that we know of?) from our world—it wouldn’t make sense for anyone else to do so. That cautionary mindset has me checking the dictionary and origins of many popular idioms, like “in one’s wheelhouse” (stems from baseball), or the etymology of words, like “adrenaline” (coined in 1901), to see if they fit in the setting.

Anguish

If servants learned the secret that he’d stashed away the books, it wouldn’t matter—he’d be dead—so long as they didn’t look. But Dahlia finding out he’d kept the pictures with no clothes? He’d die a dozen deaths were this disgrace to her disclosed.

[Osman/TL]

Though I doubt many people noticed this—or at the very least, no one pointed it out in the forums—these few lines are my very favorite in this volume. I fiddled with this section for about an hour to perfect the rhyme and meter, resulting in—well, read these four lines out and see if you can feel it. I wouldn’t add poetry (if you could call it that) to where it doesn’t belong, but the

interludes in *Dahlia* are a great playground. Some of them are very playful, like the chapter “Interlude: Anguish, or the Conclusion to the Picture Books” where this excerpt is from, and so I decided to play into it.

Slumfish, Silversabers

*It was a guilty pleasure available every fall in the city center.
Saury was one name for the fish, another was slumfish.*

[Osman/TL]

The parts underlined above have 町下 in the source, a term that occurs frequently enough in this series. If you take the characters literally, you can bisect it as “down” and “town.” *Hey, bozo, ya haven’t heard of this great English world “downtown” before? It’s the same compound as the Japanese, I hear you yell through your screen, but the nuance isn’t quite the same between the two languages. The downtown of a city is its central business district, which I would associate with fancy, clean, and maybe even snobby, while 下町 has more of a grungy, poor urban center vibe—direct opposites.*

Lucia

“Wine! The red kind! And I’m fine. I can drink more than ever thanks to Mr. Forto, I’ll have you know,” she said. Lucia, now equipped with a glass half full of wine, turned to Dahlia with a mischievous smile on her face. “Get this! Earlier today, Mr. Forto looked real bummed out, right? And so I said to him, ‘I bet it’s because Dahlia didn’t invite you to her party,’ and guess what? He whimpered like a puppy!”

“Sometimes when it’s hot out, he’ll wear an odd hemp shirt that totally transforms his aura.”

Hold on, let me gush about how cute drunk Lucia is! How she mispronounces everybody’s name! How she gets so excited about underwear! The illustration at the end of this chapter with her cute hairstyle and tongue poking out!

Okay, got that out of my system.

When I write Lucia's lines, I want to bring out her feminine and casual idiolect. In the source text for the first example, she described how Forto "seemed jealous." It felt almost out of place how bland that was, especially when compared to her usual animated self. So, I opted for a more flavorful way to phrase it, saying that Forto "looked real bummed out."

I do try not to make her sound *too* modern though. In the second example, I really wanted to have Lucia say that the odd hemp shirt "totally transforms [Forto's] vibes." Though I thought it would really fit the audience's image of her, I decided her character would probably not use slang *that* recent (recent with regards to our reality.)

And this wraps up Volume 6! Just like last time, there were great questions that we couldn't get to, so please ask them again when the question corner for Volume 7 opens up! As always, thank you dear readers for, well, reading! It really means a lot to me personally to see everyone get as excited about *Dahlia* as much as Shakuzan and I do. I hope to talk with you again on the forums and Discord server. Until the next volume!

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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 6

by Hisaya Amagishi

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